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SPARROW's third volume, the third in a series of five volumes, to be published with the works of eighty-seven writers from twenty-three languages, is out! It is a limited edition. So order your copies immediately.

Book details: Sweeping the Front Yard

Poems and Stories of Women in English, Malayalam, Telugu and Urdu

No of pages: 554/- Price Rs. 500/-

[Editor's Note]

This Coral Jasmine Special Issue of SNL is a celebration of our first year's partnership with The Flowering Tree organisation based in the US.

The work we did for the project under this programme was an interesting one. We put together all the material we had on Panchayati Raj for this project. It was an exciting task for our came books, reports, posters and films. This particular issue of SNL might as well be called a Panchayati Raj Special for it contains some of the recent experiences of women in Panchayats and also a retelling of experiences of women in the past. In this issue, Rajathi Salma, a well-known Tamil writer, talks about her experience of being a Panchayat President. In a recent shocking incident, Krishnaveni, a Dalit who was President of the Thaziyyuthu Panchayat, was attacked by a murderous gang. We carry details about the incident and an interview with Krishnaveni. The women's movement lost a dear friend when Subhadra Butalia passed away. We remember her with affection in this issue. We also pay homage to Dr Ketayun Dinshaw, the leading radiation oncologist who headed the Tata Memorial Centre. Do visit our website www.sparrowonline.org and do write to us.



**CORAL JASMINE
SPECIAL ISSUE**

A Long Journey Ahead: Rajathi Salma



The number of women participating in politics has increased in the last ten years. This has created the image that women are fully empowered. I leave it for you to decide if this is true. But I can say that women in politics face many complicated situations every single day. Even in their regular work they have to face many hurdles. Whether they are Panchayat Presidents or people in any other high posts in the society, they have to face these problems because

they are women.

My experience has also been similar.

In a country like India especially, women participating in politics is made possible only because of decisions taken by other members and men in the family. Our culture does not allow women to be part of the public sphere, politics in particular. Political contribution involves certain amount of power for women. But a male-dominated society does not like women wielding power. So even the reasons for granting this limited power are transformed into restrictions.

As far as I am concerned, when I look back from where I am today, ten years ago I was a poet. A girl who had studied only up to Eighth Standard and was forced to write using a pseudonym because I was threatened by the family and the community not to write. But I had great concerns about the society and was eager to remove every kind of discrimination in the society. My political entry took place at this point of time in my life.

My entry into politics took place during the time of Rajiv Gandhi when the 33% reservation for women in local self government amendment was passed. This amendment (73rd amendment to the constitution passed in 1992) came into being after many years of struggle and lobbying by women and others with social concerns. If this law had not come into being I would have remained a faceless, anonymous writer. It is not an exaggeration if I say that this law enabled many women to gain political power and to a certain extent, social freedom.

Our Panchayat Ponnampatti is in between Tiruchi and Madurai. For administration purposes it is in Tiruchi district. More than 7000 people live in this place. My own place Thuvarangkurichi is a bigger town and also centrally located. It is surrounded by nine villages. Agriculture is the main occupation here and if the rains fail life here becomes very difficult. In Thuvarangkurichi Hindus and Muslims live in equal numbers. Muslims mostly go abroad to earn a living.

Women had never occupied any position in the local self-government here. For many years the Panchayat President was not elected by the people and was generally nominated. The post had become a nominated post. The "leaders" of the Hindu and Muslim community had decided that the post would alternate between a

Hindu and a Muslim chosen by them. They would normally discuss and nominate a person. Even the Panchayat members were chosen in this manner. No one could even question this procedure. The first thing a nominated person would have to do would be to carry out the orders of the so-called "leaders". They would be just puppets in their hands. If it is a Hindu Panchayat President he would sign a blank paper and hand it over to the Hindu leader and if it is a Muslim Panchayat President he would do the same and hand it over to the Jamat leader. This was the usual procedure.

In 2001 both sides could not agree upon who should be the Panchayat President and in anger they generally announced that anybody could face the elections. Each side believed that it was strong. My husband was a very popular person among both the communities in our town. He wanted to stand for election and become the Panchayat President. But since this was a constituency reserved for women he had no other go but to make me stand for elections. It is important to mention one thing here. Even if women take part in politics it is the men who function from behind them. It is often done openly and at times it is hidden. My entry into politics took place when this kind of an environment prevailed. I was generally not interested or eager to be in politics but I decided that I must make use of this opportunity to serve the people.

I went with my husband to campaign for votes from people who belonged to this constituency. Only then I realised that for many years they have been living without even basic amenities. Local governance is for ensuring that the basic rights of people in the lower rungs of society are not taken away. It is a job that is even more important than that of a Member of Legislative Assembly or a Member of Parliament. When there have been no elections for the past thirty years who could these people go to and demand what they needed? Why will men not elected by people but nominated by those who used religion as a mask, want to serve these people? How could they think of what people needed? They would be busy satisfying the needs of the leaders of their community. The people did not count for them because after all they did not have to come to the people and ask for votes and prove themselves in any way.

When I went to canvass for votes in Dalit villages in the night there were neither roads, nor lights and people were living amidst snakes and insects. This saddened me immensely. I assured them that I would take care of all the amenities they needed if I won the elections. Wherever we went people believed in our assurances and promises. Those who had waited for a change for such a long time trusted our promises and gave me a very big victory. I became the new President of the Ponnampatti Panchayat. I had the big responsibility now of keeping my promises.

It was only after I won that I realised what a burden an official position was. The financial position of the Panchayat was so bad that there was no way I could have met people's needs. There was no income at all to take care of the assurances I had given people. The sanitation workers and lower level workers of the Panchayat could not even be paid a salary. Their income was in arrears for several months. The annual income of the Panchayat was Rs. 1.

50,000. Fishing contracts, water tax, house tax, professional tax, rent from shops in the bus stands were the only sources of income. When I checked the accounts I realised the auctioning was done for very low bids which benefitted some individuals but was a loss for the government. The people behind all this were those who had been nominated as Panchayat Presidents and done nominal work earlier and the community leaders who had backed them. There was no difference in the functioning of leaders from both the communities. I thought the right thing would be to take care of the corruption and malfunctioning in the income generation activities of the Panchayat. I took this up as my first important duty.

I thought I must first take care of the irregularities with regard to tree auctioning. Tree and pond auctioning was done for very low bids just to show that auctioning was done and the remaining amount was divided by the leaders of both the communities for temple and Jamat expenses. Not even nominal accounts were maintained for this. In order to stop this I introduced a friend as a false bidder among the bidders who bid very low. Afraid of the pressures from the leaders of both the communities, when the bidders were not coming forward, our friend raised the bids till they reached the correct amount and then withdrew from the auction. A proper auctioning bid was finally made possible. There were those who waited for just this and came to me demanding the money for the temple and the mosque. I told them I could not give them any money and deposited the money in the Panchayat funds.

Then I took the next step in financial reforms. Thuvarangkurichi bus stand had nine shops which the Panchayat owned. For many years very low rents were being paid for the shops and the shopkeepers refused to vacate. They paid a rent of Rs.265 per month to the Panchayat but they sublet the shops with the help of the Panchayat officials and earned Rs.15,000 per month. The shops badly needed renovation. They looked like they may collapse any time. My idea was to make them vacate and build new shops and rent them out for fifteen thousand rupees per shop. I called them and negotiated with them to vacate the shops. But they did not accept the demand I placed on behalf of the Panchayat to vacate the shops. They told me they were willing to face any action I may take. There was an ex-minister also among them. As usual behind all this were the leaders from both the communities. But I resolved that I would not only confront them boldly and win and end the anarchy perpetuated by them but also provide basic amenities to people by improving the financial status of the Panchayat.

I took a certificate from the Public Works Department that the shops were in a bad condition and may cause a serious loss and filed a case in the High Court, and demanded the shops be vacated in the appropriate court of law. All the cases of the Panchayat were normally dealt with by the government lawyer. But it looked like there was going to be no solution even after prolonged fighting on legal grounds. I found out that the

government lawyer was joining hands with the enemies. So I relieved him of this case and took special permission to appoint a private lawyer. The case dragged for one year but finally was decided in our favour and we got permission to vacate and demolish the shops. At this time some people representing the shop owners approached me and tried to bribe me with a few lakhs for not insisting on vacating of the shops. When I refused they threatened to kill me. But my husband faced all this boldly. Then they began to use other methods.

They threatened my husband and me that if the Panchayat demolished the shops there would be riots and that we should beware of that. So I approached the higher police officials and asked them for proper security to implement the court orders. The district headquarters is 60 kilometers away from my village. To meet higher officials one had to travel all this distance by bus. And they would also be away many times on other work. So I had to go many times. I approached the district police superintendent and asked for protection. He also assured me that it would be given. So I began to take up the next stage of activity. But when I returned from Tiruchi to my village, the local police station gave me the news that security was denied because they had got the news that some rioting may take place. The police that had to give security to implement court orders was making such excuses.

I got up next morning and went 60 kilometres again to meet the district head of the police department. He told me that the Collector was worried that there would be problems in our village and that I must go and meet him. He washed his hands of the whole thing. So I went to meet the District Collector who, instead of providing me the security, brought in a new point and told me that I was a Muslim and that the shop owners were Hindus and that this may create problems. And he expressed some doubts about the court orders. Behind all this were again the community leaders from our village. I could make out that this was behind his refusal to give security. I came back home very angry and I went again the next day with my lawyer to clarify his doubts regarding the court orders.

We went there around 11 a.m. But the Collector who was in the office refused to see us and went home by a different route. I went to his house saying I will not leave without meeting him and sat in the hall till eleven in the night with my lawyer. But he still refused to come out and I had to leave. Before leaving I told his assistant there that for me this was a challenge and that I would take the Collector to court for contempt of court and that I would see to it that this gets media attention. It was 1 a.m. when I returned to my village that night. As usual people began to gossip about me. What work could a Muslim woman have till midnight in Tiruchi and why was she meeting the Collector? I felt terrible about these rumours but I had resolved that I would not leave the task I had taken up incomplete.

The next day, on my husband's advice, I held a press meet. I told them about the dilapidated condition of the shops and showed them the PWD certificate and the court orders and told them that if the shops collapse during the rains leading to loss of life I would hold the Collector alone responsible. The next day I went to meet the Director of Panchayati Raj with press cuttings of the articles that had appeared with photographs. She was an honest IAS officer. She was happy with

the fight I was putting up. She called the Tiruchi District Collector over the phone and ordered him not to harass me and to resolve the issue immediately with no further delay. That must have scared the District Collector. He must have thought that I would go once again to higher authorities if he refused to take action and that it would create problems for him. So he called me himself and asked me to negotiate with the tenants before the revenue officer and resolve the matter.

Then began the meetings between nine shop keepers, myself and my secretary in the District Collector's office. We held one meeting every week and held twelve meetings in all. We could not reach a compromise and I had to travel 60 kilometres for each meeting. It was such a small matter. I had with me the necessary orders from the higher court. I also was a fairly well-known writer. Despite this if I was harassed to this extent it was because the higher authorities in the government were functioning in an improper manner. This enraged me immensely. I was not asking anything for myself. I was fighting to raise the financial position of my Panchayat so that the income that belongs to the government would rightfully reach it without being used by individuals and I was doing all this to provide basic amenities to people. What should be the punishment for those who put hurdles in my path and prevented me from taking even small steps to improve the life of common people? For the character assassination that I had to face who would take the responsibility? But I carried on nevertheless. In the twelfth meeting they placed nine demands, put them on paper and told me that if I agreed to them they would vacate the shops. I read them before the revenue department officer and wrote a note below saying that I would accept the nine demands provided they were subject to government rules and regulations and brought no compensation payments upon the government. No one raised any objection to the term "government rules and regulations" that I had introduced. The talks came to an end. They agreed to vacate the shops.

In a few days they vacated the shops. I took a loan of fifty lakhs from the bank and built more than eighteen shops in that place. The earlier tenants told me that they should be given the shops on rent according to our earlier "contract" that I had signed. I pointed out to them the phrase that I had added saying the auction would take place "according to government rules and regulations". After that I held the auction according to government rules and regulations. I was able to get Rs. 15,000 per month for each shop. That meant Rs. 1,80,000 per year. For 18 shops I was able to get nearly Rs. 32, 00,000. Before this the monthly rent for a shop was Rs. 265 and the annual income was a mere Rs. 3180. The nine shops had brought a meagre income of Rs. 27, 880 per year. From this you can understand what a difference in income I had brought about. I had increased it by about 120%.

Adopting the same tactics I increased the income of the Panchayat in every single income-earning aspect and increased the annual income of the Panchayat.

The income earned from tree auction, fishing contracts, and auction of shops was used to pay back the bank loan and with the remaining money I was able to take care of all the basic amenities of the people in my constituency. Street lamps were installed, cement roads were laid, housing facilities were provided and new toilets were built. Today the Panchayat has a sizeable income.

I am happy that I have not only been able to end the dictatorship in this region that had lasted thirty years but also have been able to take care of the basic needs of the people. But within me is still that anger against the Collector who harassed and humiliated me and made me run from pillar to post for a small matter. My husband stood by me in everything I did and cooperated with me and gave me courage and proper advice whenever needed. He did not interfere in any of my work or misuse the power I had in any manner. I could not have worked this efficiently had he not been there by me. However, in those five years that I was President of the Panchayat, I realised that it is a "miles to go" journey ahead before women are fully empowered.

—Translated from the personal account written by Rajathi Salma in Tamil, by C S Lakshmi

Poster



Being Dalit, Being Women, Being Citizens: Krishnaveni



On 13th June 2011 at 10 in the night, Krishnaveni, the Panchayat President of Thazaiyuthu Panchayat in Tirunelveli District, was brutally attacked by a murderous gang and was admitted to the Tirunelveli government hospital battling for her life. An investigative field visit was conducted by a collective of socially concerned academicians, writers and

human rights activists on June 18-19, 2011. Members of this collective were: Professor Tho. Paramasivan, Professor J Amalanathan, Professor P. Shanthi, Thiru. Lena Kumar, (Yathumaki Pathippagam), Advocate G Ramesh, Mr. S Ganesan (People's Watch), Advocate M Britto and Thiru. Mariappan (Human Rights Activist).

Ever since she got elected as President of the Panchayat Krishnaveni was being threatened and intimidated but she continued to do her job. The Fact Finding Committee revealed some shocking details about what it is to be a Dalit, a woman and a Panchayat President in a caste-ridden society.

The story of the attack on Krishnaveni is not an unusual one. Nor is it a rare incident. It is an almost every day happening all over India but it is not profitable for the media to cover such incidents nor is the public interested in such stories. Food, fashion and sex dominate our lives and the insensitivity of our lives makes us accept such incidents easily and without guilt. But Krishnaveni's story needs to be told even if it means catching only a fleeting



Krishnaveni (first from left) has received several awards for good governance. At an event in Delhi with Sonia Gandhi

second's attention from people preoccupied with other matters, in the hope that maybe that one second will transform at least, the attitude of some people.

Krishnaveni stood as an independent candidate for the Thazaiyuthu Panchayat elections and won by 700 votes. In the last five years she took many steps to implement plans to develop the Thazaiyuthu Panchayat. She won the Sarojni Naidu Award from

Women in Panchayats

President Pratiba Patil in 2009 for successfully implementing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) in the district. Her honesty and boldness have won her appreciation from all quarters and from all castes. However, her honest and strict way of functioning as the Panchayat President seems to have irritated and angered some Panchayat members belonging to other castes. Here was a Dalit woman who was functioning efficiently and honestly. Not only was she personally incorruptible, she was also preventing them from accepting bribes or accumulating money in other ways. More than anything else, the fact that she was a Dalit and a woman, angered them and made them feel jealous. They felt that what she was doing not only insulted them as men but it also insulted their caste superiority. This woman was after all from the Arundhathiyar caste, considered the lowest of castes. So they sat in the Panchayat constantly raising objections to all her plans.

Krishnaveni was threatened and intimidated and opposed continuously for the past five years. Once in the village assembly they snatched the report from her hand. They tried to twist her hands and hit her another time. She was never given a chair to sit in the Panchayat office. They refused to sign cheques, delayed official procedures and tried to stall all her efforts to develop the village. They could do all that only because they belonged to an upper caste that felt that it had the right to not only control and oppress someone from the lower caste but also physically deal with her.

Much to their surprise and annoyance, Krishnaveni did not give in. She filed complaints against such people to the Block Development Officer and various other officers including the police and government officials. Very often her complaints were not accepted by the police or were not properly investigated. There was a general notion that she constantly brought complaints about caste discrimination. Although some complaints were filed as FIRs in the Thazaiyuthu Police Station, many others remained unattended.



Krishnaveni in the hospital after the attack

The immediate reason for the attack was the difference of opinion that arose between Krishnaveni and one of the Panchayat representatives, Subramanian aka Subbu, over the building of a public toilet in the wasteland next to the canal of the village. Subbu strongly objected to a public toilet being built near the canal that was in the backyard of his house.

Although Subbu and Miran Kani objected to this, the Konar community people and other castes and women of that area had chosen that place for building a public toilet. The decision to build a public toilet in this area was taken at a Panchayat meeting. Subbu felt that a toilet in his backyard would be an insult to his caste status and continued to oppose it and got a stay order to stop the building of the toilet, from the district authorities who took the decision

saying that nothing can be built in the wasteland near the canal. Krishnaveni gathered many people to support her and to oppose the decision of the district authorities and filed a petition on the day she was attacked.

The assistant investigator in the police department knew the person attacked was from the Dalit community but he registered a First Information Report not under sections of SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act but under sections of Indian Penal Code and under Section 4 of Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Harassment of Women Act 2002. It was only after many human rights activists and other groups protested that it was also registered under the Prevention of Atrocities Act and sent to the Judiciary committee of the Department of Justice.

The Fact Finding Committee has observed that there is a general feeling in the Police Department that this is merely a law and order problem. That this incident has many dimensions has not been understood by them. The senior police officials feel that had Krishnaveni not been so honest and incorruptible and if she had compromised on certain counts this incident would not have taken place. This accounts for the casual manner in which the whole incident has been treated. Krishnaveni was brutally attacked and suffered grievous injuries and lost one ear and was battling for her life in the hospital but the Block Development Officer and the Collector did not even bother to visit her at the hospital at the time of the report being written.

'What does this reveal except the inhuman ways of the district authorities who are part of the government bureaucracy?' is the question raised in the report.

Krishnaveni now fears that she and her family were not given proper security to continue to function efficiently in her capacity as President of the Panchayat. The Fact Finding Committee's Report says, "this fear existing among honest Panchayat Presidents, representatives and government officials is a challenge to basic democracy, an honest and efficient bureaucracy and people's full participation in the government plans."

The Committee recommended that Krishnaveni must be given armed protection. She was recommended a compensation of Rs.50,000 under Prevention of Atrocities Act by the government. But taking into account the nature of the murderous attack and its intensity the Committee felt that her compensation must be increased to Rs.3,00,000. The committee also felt that steps must be taken for her medical expenses and recovery and that the earlier complaints filed by her must be independently investigated and action taken. The Committee demanded that the assistant investigator of Thazalyuthu Police Station, K Paldurai, who had scuttled the investigation, must be transferred.

The Committee made some suggestions for making honest governance possible. These suggestions strike at the very root of the current system of functioning that is steeped in the caste system. The Committee made three important points that have

to be taken care of for democracy to function in a way that all its citizens, whatever their caste or creed or class (or gender) can fully participate in the governance:

1. Dalits and women who work in Panchayats especially in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, must be given proper protection and be enabled to function without fear with hurdles in their path removed.
2. Where Dalits are Presidents of the Panchayats only another Dalit must be made the vice-president.
3. Similarly when Dalit women become Presidents, the vice-presidents must also be Dalit women so that signing of cheques and other activities can be done speedily and without hurdles.

What does Krishnaveni feel about all this? Here are some excerpts from an interview she gave to the Fact Finding Committee:

From the day I took charge, there have been many problems: problems within streets, roads, water problems, housing allocation, everything was a problem. They would never let me conduct meetings. I had to hold meetings only with the help of the police. Even if I gave a complaint to the police, they wouldn't take action immediately. Even if I phone and call them on an emergency, they won't come immediately. Inspector Paldurai would never take action for whatever complaint I gave him. If others called, he would come immediately. On Republic Day after the flag hoisting, I was making arrangements for the Village Council meeting, when the vice-president's representative came and twisted my left arm over my back and broke my arm. We called this very same Inspector Paldurai, but he never came. We came to this same hospital for treatment. The Athithamilar Peravai held a protest. The speech of the poor can never reach the public sphere. They will never listen to anything we say.

Did they say anything when they were attacking you?

They did not let me talk at all. They hacked at me blindly, from all directions. We were going to build a toilet. After a long struggle, we were going to build a toilet. Subbu Konar's elder brother's son Avudaiyappa Konar had brainwashed the Nadar boys and brought them along. That day, it had taken a long time for work at office to get over. It became 9.30 p.m. The jamabandi—settlement of land revenue—was to take place the next day. So I was writing out the old age pensions, patta and ration cards. My father-in-law had gone for night labour. I had my periods also on that day. I couldn't even walk, was feeling dizzy. So I decided to take an auto.

Was it the auto you took usually? Or was it a different one?

I always walk back. Since I was menstruating and I hadn't eaten in the afternoon, I was feeling dizzy. I couldn't walk and was afraid I would fall. That's why I took an auto. The auto driver agreed to come. Immediately after turning at

Karuppasamy Koil, seeing the gang coming with sickles, he ran away. I also tried to get out of the auto. I couldn't. There is always a gang of men hanging around that place. I have told the police so many times, not to let men sit there. They would sit there and use obscene language and hurl stones at people. That day, when they came running with sickles and knives, the auto driver ran away. They hacked at me as I sat inside the auto. They didn't let me talk. They shut my mouth and eyes. They were hacking at me so badly, that I couldn't scream. It was past 8-30 p.m. Normally everyone would go away to watch the drama (TV) and be lost in that [around that time].

Before the incident, did they say anything about attacking you?

They didn't say that. If they had, we would have been cautious. We would have been careful. They only said that they would attack my husband. They said they would cut him down on the road. Finally, he was transferred. My children have no protection. From the time I became President, there have been problems. If I had said 'yes' to everything they said and gone along playing second fiddle to them, it would have been fine. There would have been no problems. I did not allow anyone to be furtive or take bribes. That was the problem. I had stood in the elections as an independent candidate. I had learnt of the existence of the Athithamilar Peravai only after taking up my post. Since they were of my community, I would go there once in a way but not very regularly.

The people were supportive, go and ask them. They would co-operate well. In between, there was a quarrel with the Nadar community. In 2008, when I had gone to Delhi to get the Sarojini Naidu Award from Sonia madam, there had been a quarrel among the adolescent boys during a caste-clash. It became a problem when Thatchanammal Nadar or some Nadar hit our god during the fight. I had gone to Delhi during this time. People who didn't like me said that I was the one who had instigated the clash. Then that clash took on monstrous forms, and however much we tried to set things right, it kept smouldering. (Her daughter Buvaneshwari is nearby and adds: Now there was a problem with the festival too. My mother was not doing anything and they came and asked her, how can you come to our temple? Krishnaveni continues) They would use such filthy debasing language, they would call the women 'naked bottomed' and other things. Who would accept such things, madam? Can we be responsible for these things? So there were problems.

Who were the people who were responsible for most of the problems during your term?

There was Sultan, who belongs to the Muslim community. In the canal issue, Subbu has been giving a lot of problems from last year. Then the Nadars. My native place is near Nagercoil. All the people here go to the Nadar houses during weddings and remove the leaves that people have eaten from.

They would go to dig graves in the burial ground. They would do work for the Nadar community. After I took my post, I did not let them go for such work. Since they do the canal digging work, they don't go. Those people can't stand this. They're angry.

Once when the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme work was going on in the canal, Sultan came and stood naked there. If he comes and stands this way, how can the women stay there? The police did not take any action in this instance also. If they bribe the police, they will be only on their side. T.P.M. Maideen Khan* was in the government then. I told him. I told Poongothai* madam. I had stood as an independent. They told her that I had stood on behalf of the AIADMK and made sure that she didn't take any action. I went and saw Karuppasamy Pandian** also. They feel that no one from the struggling communities should come forward. Subbu Konar and along with him, Meeran and Sultan, all of them threatened me against building a toilet. We went about it formally. We asked the RDO, the Tahsildar. They said, if there is space, go ahead and build. The people themselves have decided the spot; Konar, Asari, Thevar—all the castes came together and decided. Subbu Konar's land has encroached mostly on wastelands. That's why he didn't like it.

*Ministers in the DMK government of 2006-11

**DMK Member of the Legislative Assembly in the same period

(She is unable to continue. Finally she says.) I am a very brave person. But after they have hacked at me blindly, without even caring that I am a woman, I am very scared. After this, will any person from our community come bravely into public life? If they hack me, a woman, what is the fate of my husband and children? What protection is there? I am very scared. (She weeps)

A Poem for Krishnaveni

The Sakkili woman,
Who once lay crouched in a corner,
Standing erect on the stage, serving the public,
Those who have ordered us for generations,
Can they digest this?
Will the dominant castes tolerate it?
Will the crowd that survives and fills its stomach
Cheating and ordering us around, bear it?

A selfish crowd set the tunes
To let the town go to hell
You refused to dance to their tunes
Staking your life
You struggled to free yourself and rose
Like a top on the spin

You served the people tirelessly and efficiently
The awards you won, brave goddess of the female clan,
Were they sticks that poked their eyes?

They say even spirits pity a woman
But those five beasts,
Possessed with casteist rage
Surrounded you, a lone woman,
With weapons,
Hacking, cutting and ripping
Attacking you with murderous fury
Leaving you barely alive
Floating on a flood of blood,
Our sister, when we read of this in the news,
We, your brothers, got flustered
And deeply anxious

Even if we should hawk and spit upon the faces
Of these animals, only our spit will be wasted.
If the ones who govern us should prove indifferent
If the department of justice does not provide justice
Our blue army will provide justice, said our brother Athiyaman,
Upon the blood you have spilt,
We swear that this shall be so.

—S Raj in *Dalit Writing*, Political statement on June 27,
2011 at 7:26 am

This poem is written for Aathithamilar Peravai
www.aathithamizharperavai.com

The Story of Chellamma

Krishnaveni was attacked and nearly killed. Chellamma, another Panchayat President, decided to go back to cleaning toilets three years ago, because the dominating castes in her village will not let her do any work. Here is an excerpt from an interview published in the *Dalit Murasu* in May 2008 with Pazhaiya Appaneri Panchayat President Chellamma from Virudhunagar district.

Interview: M. Ponnusamy

Tell us about yourself, ma'am...

My name is Chellamma. I am 45 years old. I was born in Elanthakulam, near Sankarankovil, given in marriage at Pazhaiya Appaneri. I had a son and a daughter. The girl died. My husband used to work as a village official. He died when the children were very young. My son and I have lived in this village for 23 years. My son works in the match factory of the ex-president. I used to clean the toilets in the Kovilpatti Kamalammal Hospital. I was managing the family by doing conservancy work. I did not think in my dreams even that I would become President. For some days now, I have not been

going to do conservancy work.

How could a person doing conservancy work like you become Panchayat President?

I have been living in this village for 23 years. Nobody knows much about me here. I was just minding my work as a sweeper in Kamalammal Hospital. Narayanasamy Naicker was President. In this year, the people of the Kudumbamar caste also started contesting. Ravi Naicker was the person who was making them stand for elections. To contest against them, ex-president Narayanasamy Naicker asked our people to contest. Since people were afraid that they would also be killed like Maruthankinaru Servaaran, nobody was willing.

Finally, he asked me to contest. He said he would take care, no matter what problems may arise. That is why I contested. I would go for conservancy work in the night and election work in the day. He said there would be no problems. That is why I contested. Yet, among the Naicker and the Kudumbamar there was not one person who did not scold me. They threatened me saying, we will see how a Sakkili woman stands against us and wins. Since I was afraid, I would go to work via Mudukkalam Kulam only. I still won by a margin of 200 votes!

The government has passed laws against manual scavenging, yet you go for this work...

I don't know about all that. Ok, so if the government bans it, will they immediately stop? Oh no. Even in this same Kovilpatti Bus Stand, people do manual scavenging. And clean toilets by hand. The government will talk like that. We do what we have to do. To eat, we need to clean toilets. Since I go to work in the hospital, there would be an occasional delivery case. So if I wash their clothes and do their work for them, I will get some Rs. 300, 400. That is my livelihood. A law cannot do anything. They will talk about it here and there in meetings. It will come in the papers. Yet, nothing has happened, right? All this is just for show. What is the benefit we get out of the laws they lay down? Sanitation work is our only peace.

After you have become President, do they treat you respectfully?

At least when I was doing scavenging work, I did not have any problems. Nobody liked the fact that I have become President. They say, how can a woman, that too a Sakkili woman, become President? Even before becoming President I used to call people Saamy or Muthalaali (literally: god or owner). I still do. I have to. That is the rule here. Yet, everyone from the children to the elderly of the village call me only Chellamma. I don't get any respect. Nobody listens to what I say. After becoming President, I have not been allowed to sit in the chair. They would say that I should stand and talk. Only after the Tahsildar and Collector told me, did I begin to sit in the chair. Even if they call me President outside the village, in the village they will only call me by name. The ward members,

the vice-president and others, call me by name and address me without using any respectful honorifics. I cannot talk anything against them.

That schemes have you carried out after becoming President?

It has been nine months since I became President. Till date, I have done nothing for this Panchayat. They have not let me do anything. Power belongs to them. I cannot do anything. The vice-president and ward members will all gang up. Nothing I say will work. They will say, should I listen to a Sakkili woman? In these nine months, my work has been to go in the morning, wait for the accounts guy to turn up, then sign some receipts, birth or death certificates for people who ask.

I sign where the accountant tells me to. That's all. After I have signed, I will have to run around to get the vice-president's signature. He won't sign that easily. I signed the cheque for the wages of the conservancy workers in the Panchayat. The vice-president hasn't signed it for three months now. I can't even talk against him.

A woman is the President of this country. Did you not also try to use your powers in a similar way?

That woman may be able to. Who knows what caste she belongs to? Even after becoming President, this broken-down-house and the toilets of Kamalammal Hospital are my lot. I have no livelihood other than that. Power belongs only to the upper castes. Not to us. I cannot ask why. For the crime of asking why, they killed Jaggaiyan and Servaaran. That is the fate of men. I am a woman. I do not have male support. I do not have any support. My son is my only support.

Till now, I have only faced opposition. If I talk about the water problem, they angrily tell me to mind my own business. I cannot stand and talk anywhere inside the village. There is no protection for me or my son. The vice-president and the ward members are the problem. I am not able to live in my own village. In fear, we have to live in the last room of the ex-president's match factory. If there is some meeting, they will let me know.

What is the difference between doing conservancy work and becoming Panchayat President?

While doing conservancy work, I got paid a handful. I kept myself to myself and my work. Nobody opposed me. After becoming President, I do not even have gruel to drink. I do not have peaceful sleep. I cannot walk freely on the roads. I cannot live in my own village. I wonder why I became President. I wanted to do good things for the village. But I haven't been able to do anything. The reason is that I belong to a low caste. They only accept things that the higher caste people do. They won't accept anything we do.

One thing is clear. Even if people of low caste come to power, they cannot do anything. All that talk about 'you can do anything' is just talk. A person born into the Sakkili caste can stay alive only if we listen to everything they say. They put my picture in the Kumudham magazine and wrote about me—that everybody is respectful to me and that they call me for all functions. But I do not have any such respect. I am only a dummy. They made me a President just for my signature.

What are your future plans?

Kalaignar's son Stalin came and held a meeting. We went. They gave ID cards to all the Presidents. What do we get from an ID card like this? No scheme has been implemented here. They take me here and there for meetings and gatherings. But I cannot talk anything. I do not have a salary. What is Rs. 300 useful for? Not for expenses. There is no money for gruel even. There is no use being in this post. I have decided that I don't want this post. They are going to build one more floor at Kamalammal Hospital, it seems. They have called me again for work. I am going back to my old job of cleaning toilets!

The story of Jayanthi, the President of Thandakaran Palayam Panchayat, Avinashi Taluk, Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu, is, in contrast, an inspiring story of courage and determination. It needs to be recorded here to show how governance is possible for a Dalit woman who is efficient and able if some people in the system are honest and aware of the constitutional rights of every citizen.

The Story of Jayanthi

In Interview, Personal Narrative on June 30, 2011 at 12:42 pm

First published on the Irenees website (<http://irenees.net>) Coimbatore, July 2007

"My name is Jayanthi and I contested the Local Body election from the reserved constituency of Thandakaran Palayam Panchayat, Avinashi Taluk, Coimbatore District of the State of Tamil Nadu in South India.

In my constituency only women were allowed to contest. The other five contestants were also women and they do not know anything about the Panchayati Raj system or the election process. By fielding them the intention was that we should not win but be defeated. They feared that if we won, other party people would join us. But after the election there was no problem. All was over with the election.

I have been in the Self Help Group for the past five years. Now it is my sixth year. Although I was in the Self Help Group even during the time of the previous election I could not contest because it was a general constituency during that time. Only a male candidate contested, but could not win. The reason for not contesting in the previous election and for contesting in

the recent election is to be seen in the point of view of my skills and capacities. I have undergone many training programmes conducted by some NGOs on the Panchayati Raj Institution. While I was undergoing the training, I began to think about contesting the election so that I could do something tangible for the people. Mustering up a lot of courage I contested.

After I won the election as President and took over the office, we had some problem in selecting the vice-president as it happens everywhere. He belonged to the dominant community. The matter was that if an uneducated person becomes the President, the vice-president would assume all powers in his hands. He would be invariably from the dominant community. Often he would manipulate and assume all powers including the power to sign cheques. The President would be unable to exercise her/his power and cannot question him. She or he would have to simply sign the cheques and sit quietly. In such situations the vice-president would be de facto President and the President would be reduced to the stature of a vice-president. That's why there is problem in electing the vice-president every time. However our vice-president follows our advice. Krishnasamy by name, he belongs to the Bayal Community. We take administrative decisions in a committee consisting of nine ward members.

Among the nine members five are Dalits and four are non-Dalits. One of the members becomes the vice-president. The four ward members (non-Dalits) did not support the candidate we proposed as vice-president. The Dalit representation was six including me. The vice-president is chosen by election. All the ward members exercise their voting rights in electing the vice-president. The President can support any one. When the President supports a candidate, problems can arise.

People invite me to public functions at the school. With regard to family functions such as boring the ears, marriages etc., even though they invite me they would look at me only as an untouchable. Even today it is the practice. I don't go for such functions because I feel discriminated. When it comes to other public functions, they don't show their feelings of discrimination so blatantly. They had invited me to the School Annual Day. They could not do any mischief there. They have invited me to family functions as well. If the function is held at their homes, they show their feelings. When it is held outside in a hall, they don't show their feelings openly. They consider me as polluting only inside their house. If it is a Marriage Hall, they treat me well. They give respect to me as the President and freely talk with me. The basic factor is that our caste people work in their fields. So they would view us only that way.

I have an unforgettable experience that I want to share with you. It is regarding the allotment for ten Group Houses. We started constructing the houses according to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) list. The construction was done with good amount of cement and it has come up to concrete roofing.

Somebody whom we do not know for sure—whether Scheduled Caste or Backward Caste—sent a petition under the name 'public' to the Chief Minister alleging that the President and vice-president of not constructing good houses. "They are using mud only and so the CM should take proper action" was their contention.

The Block Development Officer (BDO) came from the Collectorate. He called me and said: "President, a petition has come. So many such things usually come. In your case this is the only one. Don't be scared. Those who are not in your favour will do a lot more like this. You don't worry." When I told him that we involved an engineer and did everything properly, he said, "Don't worry. You do your work."

My husband helps me in taking the motor for repairing. You see when the motor in a pump set is out of order; I cannot carry it for repairing. I know it is not my job. But if I entrust that work with someone he may charge some commission for his work. Then the expenditure will go beyond the income. Even if I do not carry it myself, I have to go. Don't I?

After becoming the President of the Panchayat a great change has occurred within me. My personal capacities like communication and leadership skills have developed to a great extent. In the past, I was involved in educating the people about exercising their voting rights. Now I have come to realize what power I have. I have to think about what to present before the Collector when I meet him. This election has taught me to think about how to relate to others and to a councillor. I have already got training in preparing reports and book keeping while I was in the Self-Help Group. I don't need any other training. Our clerk is now under suspension. So I take care of his duties also. During the last term, accounts for Rs. 1,28,000 have not been shown. The former President had transferred that amount to the clerk's account and he had spent it for some other purpose without paying the electricity bills. Even for that expenditure proper bills have not been submitted. Now that the clerk has been suspended, I am looking after the accounts."

In his article, "How many more Dalit Panchayat Presidents Are Going to be Murdered?" In *Critical Writing, Personal Narrative* written on July 2, 2011, Ravichandran, a research scholar in the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, quotes Dr. Ambedkar's statement about the Indian Republic being a Republic of the Touchables, by the Touchables for the Touchables. Reading the interviews of Krishnaveni, Jayanthi and Chellamma make us realise how much more we need to work to change this state of things and how the caste system continues to pose a threat to democracy. Writing Caste blog (<http://writingcaste.wordpress.com>) from where all the interviews and details have been taken is doing a very positive work in terms of presenting all possible details about Dalit life and experiences and analysing them in the context of Indian democracy.

Women Empowered

SPARROW has an interesting collection of materials on Panchayati Raj and the participation of women in the local self governance. Some of the books on the subject based on field work, case studies and interviews bring out a range of inspiring experiences. They also deal with what empowering women means and why it needs to be defined.

All over the world, women tend to be sidelined and excluded from political power. Despite a few women who have risen to high positions, women in general are still excluded from political fields. This is the case in India too, where electoral politics remains a male domain. If women are marginalised at the national and state levels, the situation is far worse in the rural areas. Women Panchayats grew out of the increasing recognition of the need for women to participate in politics.

The Older Regime

A few All-Women Panchayats existed in Karnataka, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra after the independence, with mixed results. A group of women scholars made a study of All-women Panchayats in the state of Maharashtra during the sixties to the nineties, and their findings are documented in a book titled *And Who Will Make The Chapatis?* edited by Bishakha Datta. The title of the book is taken from an incident. A village woman asked her husband if she could attend a training camp on panchayats. His response, 'And who will make the chapattis?' has been adopted for the title.

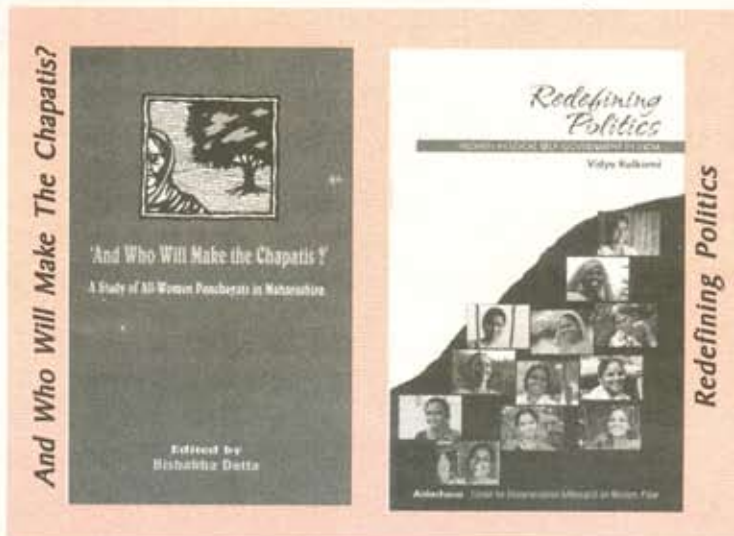
This study deals with the experiences of 12 All-women Panchayats, and primarily concerns itself with one broad-based question: Have All-women Panchayats carved out a political space that allows women to transform their lives?

The first known All-women Panchayat in Maharashtra was formed at Nimbut, a village of Pune district, in 1962, the next one in Mauje Rui village of the same district. And during the 1989 elections, eight Women's Panchayats were formed. Two more came up in 1992 at Bhende Khurd and Brahmanghar.

The Experiences

After meeting and talking with the women, the study team has retained memorable images of the interviewees. One of them is that of one sarpanch, nonchalantly ignoring her brother-in-law's repeated commands to go fetch the cattle at once!

Kamalbai Babulal Kakade, sarpanch of **Nimbut**, was a spirited woman in her youth. She had studied till Class IV, learnt to swim, ride horses and drive a car. She married into a powerful landlord



family at age 17, and through the support of her husband and in laws, the All-women Panchayat was elected. She became the sarpanch. 'If I can run the house, why not a panchayat?' she had asked.

This All-women Panchayat achieved many things during its tenure, such as building a panchayat office and bringing electricity to the village. It also ushered in a period of relative peace. The men of the village were too embarrassed to have their quarrels sorted out by a woman sarpanch, and so they quarreled less!

But the term of this panchayat ended when Kamalbai's husband said 'That's enough now.' So Nimbut's experiment with women's political empowerment closed down on Babulal's order!

Padmavati Ramchandra Kare initiated the formation of an All-women Panchayat in **Mauje Rui** in 1984, provoked by water scarcity in the village. The women had to spend hours every day fetching water from a well half a kilometer away. So Padmavati stood for elections, persuading other women to stand too. The men candidates withdrew, fearing the shame of being defeated by the women. So the women won unopposed.

They built a well, connected it to a tank, fitted pipes and brought water inside the homes. They also built classrooms for the school, brought electricity and supported afforestation.

But an All-women Panchayat has not been elected again in Mauje Rui, because their families have had enough.

The experiment with an All-women Panchayat in **Bhende Khurd** was a failure. The villagers were sugarcane farmers, and sugarcane dominated the village economy and politics.

Namdeo Rakhmaji Nawle, one of the biggest cane-growers, was also the most powerful man who held every institution there in his fist. He had been sarpanch for 25 years and also held most of the important positions. When Nawle lost control of the development credit society to another landlord, he decided to form an all-women panchayat as a means of holding on to power. With his machinations, an All-women Panchayat was elected with his daughter in law as sarpanch.

This panchayat looked like a smiling snapshot of democracy from outside, but it was just a puppet in Nawle's hand.

Anna Hazare's own village, **Ralegan Siddhi**, is recognised as a model village. Though located in the drought-prone district of Ahmednagar, it was turned into a green oasis of prosperity by the social reformer and village patriarch. Hazare initiated Ralegan's effective watershed management scheme, use of solar and wind energy, a unique schooling system, *shramdan* or voluntary labour, and fight against alcoholism. An All-women Panchayat was formed in this village as part of its overall development.

Anna Hazare proposed the All-women Panchayat, believing that women are important to a smooth functioning of government and family. Anna admitted that the women panchayat was not yet able to function independently. But forming it was a step forward, though only the beginning.

When women take part in politics, it is usually assumed that they would function differently from men. Their governance is expected to be more honest, less centralized and more efficient. It is also assumed that women in power will be eager to tackle women's specific problems, be more accessible to women and have more empathy with women who are oppressed. But this is not always the case, as the election of an All-women Panchayat in **Nimgaon Bhogi** village proved.

Inspired by Anna Hazare, the elders of Nimgaon village—all men—decided to have an All-women Panchayat. Usha Bhade, a Maratha graduate in Philosophy from Aurangabad University, became the sarpanch. The remaining eight seats were divided equally between the Marathas and the coalition of Malis and scheduled castes.

By the end of the first year, four of the members had put in their resignation, unhappy with the sarpanch's way of functioning and neglect of the village. Usha was a rare woman with political clout of her own. But she had not used it for the village's benefit. One of her critics remarked, "Because she wanted power, she exhausted our desire and faith in an All-women Panchayat."

Brahmanghar's experience of an All-women Panchayat was better than the last two. This village could grow only one crop of rice a year as they were dependent on rain water. So the men would go to work in the towns and cities to earn a living when their fields were not cultivated. This resulted in the women coming forward in the absence of the men. And an All-women Panchayat was elected.

The panchayat demanded and got one more teacher. They provided toys, slides and swings for the village school. They constructed additional rooms for two families under the Indira Awas Yojana. They upgraded a makeshift gutter into a cement and brick one. And they started a subsidized gobar gas scheme. And best of all, they built a 70 foot road from the village to the primary school, with voluntary labour. The members felt a great sense of achievement with the works that they did.

The village of **Bitargaon** had a prominent landmark—an elevated, concrete water tank. It also had a concrete school building. Its outside walls were colourfully painted with maps, landscapes and portraits of national leaders. The school had classes upto Class VII for 86 boys and 74 girls, taught by eight teachers.

The village panchayat office also had a television set and a telephone—items of luxury they were proud of having acquired. The spirit behind all this progress was Satyabhama Lawand, whom the villagers call "Nani." She was sarpanch of Bitargaon till October 1994. Nani was a social rebel who took up works like tilling the land—from which Maratha women were barred—after her husband's death.

The dry and dusty village suffered from water scarcity, and the dilapidated school badly needed rebuilding. Neither of these problems were tackled by successive male-dominated Panchayats. Under the bold leadership of Nani, an All-women Panchayat was formed and the problems were solved with their determined hard work. They also stopped drunkenness in the village. They were greatly helped in the works, of course, by male supporters like Dadasaheb Patil, Namdeo Mali and others.

While in the above cases, All-women Panchayats were formed practically without opposition, in other cases they had to actually face stiff contests.

The Role of Shetkari Sanghatana

In 1985, the Shetkari Sanghatana (Farmer's Association), a Maharashtra based peasant movement, decided to take up the issue of rural women's exclusion from political power. This ultimately led to the spontaneous formation of five Sanghatana backed All-women Panchayats in Maharashtra from 1989 to 1994.

The small taluka town of **Chandwad** saw a large gathering, estimated at 25 000 women and one lakh men, in 1986 November 9-10. Apart from the number, the significance of the gathering lay in its radical nature. The meeting resolved to view development from a women's perspective. There, for the first time in Maharashtra, a non political mass movement called for women to contest panchayat elections.

Although **Metikheda** was part of the cash-rich cotton belt, most of the residents struggled below the poverty line as they did not own land. At the extreme other end was the Saroday family, who owned 125 acres of land and huge wealth in cattle, shops and other things. A Saroday had been sarpanch for 27 years, and in the late eighties the family controlled practically every political institution. But in 1989, an all-women panel overthrew them after a stiff competition.

This new panchayat undertook many needed reforms, including the bold steps of collecting tax from the residents, and fighting corruption.

In the tiny village of **Vitner**, the women are not allowed footwear in the presence of men. They have to go barefoot in the village, regardless of the season or time of the day. The Shetkari Sanghatana eventually impacted the village after its inhabitants attended the historic Chandwad conference in 1986. In April the next year, the gram sabha decided to elect an All-women Panchayat in Vitner.

During its five year tenure, the new panchayat made several changes in the village. Vitner became much lauded in the national press as a model village in terms of women's property rights. But in reality, they still had no say in deciding matters over their lands. Neither were they allowed to put on footwear in their husbands' presence.

Conclusion of the Study

One evident constant that emerges from the study is that women's panchayats could not have been formed without the support of male leaders or elders. Thus it is clear that a necessary precondition

for women's mobilisation is the general mobilisation of the men.

The Current Scene

Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the new Panchayat Raj Act came into effect in the country on 24th April 1993. This Act is slowly bringing about changes, despite difficult challenges. Women leaders are now emerging from every corner of rural India. In a booklet titled *Redefining Politics* and subtitled Women in Local Self-Government in India, Vidya Kulkarni traces the journey of 12 women to political leadership.

First in the list is **Kushawarta Bele**, a village volunteer turned District Chairperson of Women and Child Development Committee, Latur, Maharashtra. Kushawarta studied only up to Class Six, and was married off at age 13. She then became a health worker, earning a very small salary. But the experience of talking to people about health issues was the beginning of her participation in social affairs. Kushawarta later decided to work for public causes, and realised that one should be involved in decision making processes in order to do this. Through seven years of tireless work, she has won the confidence of people and achieved political power.

Manik Devi, sarpanch of Narayanpur village in Haryana state, believes in the power of working together. And she has the full support of the women in the village.

Haryana has a poor gender ratio, and is highly regressive regarding the status of women. Manik Devi has boosted the cause of women in the village. A good number of women now attend the gramsabha meetings, which was not allowed earlier. Besides, the sarpanch has succeeded in bringing a water supply scheme to the village. Though illiterate, Manik Devi has done much for the people of her village.

Ratnamala Vaidya is another woman who enjoys the strong support of women. She is grampanchayat member of Ganeshpur, Maharashtra. "We are not born sisters, but we are strong sisters," is the unique slogan in this village.

Ratnamala is a frontline active worker of the Mahila Rajsatta Andolan (women's movement for political power) and has groomed herself for political roles. She has advanced the causes of women and of the poor. She believes that her position of power is of no value if it cannot award the due benefits of schemes meant for the poor.

Yashoda Bisht, of Mahad in Tehri Garhwal district, was elected sarpanch in March 2002. They had expected her to be a namesake head and that real power would remain in the hands of the deputy, a man. But once she got the position, she refused to be a puppet. Yashoda joined the organisation Bhuvaneshwari Ashram, where she received training for her role as sarpanch. She has had many works done, among which is the starting of a junior college in the village. Education of girls is one of her major agendas.

Baby Gautam, with her strong leadership qualities, leads from the front in social struggles. She is panchayat member of the two villages of Marakbodi and Dongargaon, which share the same grampanchayat.

Baby's participation is keenly sought in every important

committee of the village. She believes in full transparency in functioning, and that it can be achieved only by involving a maximum number of people in decision making.

Pratima Behra of Gobra grampanchayat in Orissa has been elected sarpanch for two successive terms. She was earlier an active member in the self help groups of the village, and was first elected in 2000, when the post was declared reserved for women.

In 2005, when the post was open to all, she contested and won again. She practiced transparency and received people's participation in implementation of programmes such as water schemes, construction of roads and housing. This helped in good quality of works done and prevention of misuse of government funds.

Susheela Pawar became sarpanch of Donawali in Maharashtra in 2004. The village did not have elections for 42 years, and a handful of men controlled the administration. Some youths felt that this condition needed to change, formed a panel and contested elections. They won with a thumping majority.

A social activist, Susheela had worked with Samvad, and NGO, and received special training on women's health issues. She perceives her post as an extension of her work for the people. Susheela feels that maintaining transparency in administration was the key to a good Local Self-Government.

Beena Tiwari was elected sarpanch of Koti Tyunsa in Uttaranchal in Marh 2003. A month later, the village men called for a meeting and pressurised her to resign. But she refused. Through the Bhuaneswari Ashram, Beena familiarised herself with government schemes and acquired relevant information. She totally dedicated herself to the village affairs and followed up schemes to see them implemented.

Beena has encouraged women's participation in panchayats. Holding regular gramsabhas, maximum participation of the people, efficient implementation of schemes, sincere and ceaseless attempts to ensure that the poor get the benefit of the schemes meant for them, are some of her achievements.

Parvati Padvi has been confronting injustice with direct action. She lives in Kothada village in Maharashtra. She is active in movements fighting for the rights of tribal people. Her family has had to suffer at the hands of local political leaders and other self-interest groups. But the family continues their work.

Parvati joined self help groups of her village and got training in herbal medicine. She has become proficient in this and is able to train others. She has built a close relationship with the women of the village and has been able to mobilise them for the causes that they fight for.

Draupatbai, sarpanch of Purni in Madhya Pradesh, has had to learn politics the hard way. She was elected in 2005, defeating seven other contestants, including the panel set up by the Patels, the powerful landlords of the village. The Patels have managed to bring her into much trouble.

Draupatbai is a mason by profession, rather unusual for a woman. Soon after the new panchayat came into power, road

construction work in the village was taken up. Draupatbai personally ensured the quality of the work. She also made sure that the funds issued for it were not misused.

Latifa Sheikh practices the self-inculcated value of putting the needs of others, especially of women, before her own. She is a grampanchayat member of Raimoha, Maharashtra.

An NGO, with most of its workers supporting the Communist Party of India (CPI) had taken up the cause of sugar cane harvesting labourers. Latifa Sheikh led the organisation of self help groups through this NGO. In the election of June 2005, Latifa Sheikh and two other women candidates from the panel were elected.

Latifa has set up a local branch of the Mahila Rajsata Andolan (Women's Rights Movement) in Raimoha. She is actively working for social causes, specially that of women.

Tapaswini Biswal became sarpanch of Ankula village, Orissa, in February 2007. She had lost at an election earlier, but her hard work earned her the confidence of the village. Since resuming the responsibilities of sarpanch, she has keenly followed the implementation of water supply scheme, the construction of roads and housing for the poor.

But some men from her own political party, threatened by her growing popularity, are opposing Tapaswini and creating obstacles to the works. However, she is confident that the people are smart enough to see through the pettiness of those who place their own interests before the village's welfare.

Some Updates

Panchayati Raj Update, a monthly report from the Institute of Social Sciences, throws light on the present situation, the achievements and struggles of women panchayat members.

August 2003 issue of the newsletter reports that President Kalam administers oath to 400 women sarpanches from different states. And addressing the elected representatives from seven states, the President said, "The strength and wealth of India lives in the villages. And when women become the leaders, the mission never fails."

October 2004 issue writes about the thrilling victory of Veena Devi who became the head of Loharpura Panchayat in Bihar.

Married at 13, widowed at 16, with one infant, two stepsons and a tough *sasural* that never allowed Veena to step out of home. A criminal disguised as her tenant threatened her with four letter words and a revolver.... She got in touch with women politicians, one of whom, MLC Pramila Devi, ... spotted her potential. Pitted against 11 wealthy and resourceful political men, and in the face of opposition from even her own sons, Veena was elected mukhiya of Loharpura Panchayat in early 2001.

September 2005 issue carries another marvelous report. Radhikabai, a woman from a family of bonded labourers, became sarpanch of Chandan Panchayat. The family was recently liberated from bondage on the orders of the Supreme Court.

August 2004 issue gives glowing praises to Chaya Kamble, a daily wage labourer who became sarpanch. "Dalit woman sarpanch

does her village proud," goes the heading. Malwadi, a village of 249 families of farmers and daily wage labourers, had become the first village in Maharashtra where every family has its own toilet.

July 2008 issue gives the news of a village in Tamil Nadu destroyed by the 2004 tsunami emerging as a model village, thanks to the efforts of its young woman panchayat president. Radhamani, elected to the post in 2006, has ensured a total turnaround by implementing various schemes with the support of government and non-government organisations.

On the other hand, there are discouraging reports too. November 2005 issue reports: A study conducted by research scholars of the SRC (in Tamil Nadu) shows that the husbands of many women panchayat presidents are still decision makers in their public lives.

May 2007 issue carries the report: Disillusioned and hopeless, all 10 members of Haryana's first All-women Panchayat of Neem Kheda village in Mewat district have decided to step down. After two and half years of working, they feel that they will never be allowed to run the panchayat efficiently.

February 2010 issue asks: "Woman power in Bihar only on paper?" It reports that the administrative affairs of Gwasara Panchayat in Narhar Sarai village are managed by the Mukhya's Yadav cohorts who leave no stone unturned to suppress the woman president Mukhya Taiteri Devi, who belongs to one of the Economically Backward Castes.

And then very damning incidents are highlighted in April 2010 issue:

On 26 January, 1998, Misri Devi, a Meena tribal woman sarpanch of Thikaria village panchayat, Rajasthan, who had replaced the sarpanch who had been removed on grounds of fraud, bribery and embezzlement, was attacked, stripped, dragged by her hair and her ornaments snatched by a gang of four persons. It is alleged the ousted sarpanch had a hand in it.

On 15 July 2007, people of the upper castes/landlords poured kerosene on Dhulla Ratnam, a woman panchayat member of the Srungavuruksham Panchayat and her eight year old grandson when they were asleep and set them afire in Andhra Pradesh's East Godavari district. Dhulla Ratnam had exposed the wrong doings of the high caste panchayat president.

"These are not isolated cases. The pattern of violence against Dalit and woman panchayat members is unmistakable. There are strong vested interests in society who are not reconciled to the empowerment of women and Dalits and are using violence, intimidation and other pressure tactics to derail the Constitutional (73rd) Amendment Act, 1992. These enemies of panchayats are working often in cahoots with sections of police and government officials."

This last report shows that we have a long long way to go in empowering women in our country.

—Malsawmi Jacob

Looking Back, Looking Forward



The government of India has made attempts to improve the status of the country's women. The 73rd amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1992, was one of the steps taken toward this goal. The reservation of 33% in the Panchayati Raj (local self government) for women was meant to facilitate their empowerment. Since then, many women have been elected to the panchayats of different states.

However, there is still the question of how these elected members are making use of the new opportunity. Some NGOs have felt the need to study and document the role and status of women panchayat members.

One of these organizations, Multiple Action Research Group (MARG), based in Delhi, made a study of women in the Panchayati Raj in Karnal district of Haryana state. Their findings and analysis are documented in a book titled *They Call Me Member Saab*, published in 1998. It is co-written by Bharti Tekchandani, Kiran Jyoti and Priti Sharma. Dr. Vasudha Dhagamwar has written the foreword.

While many doubters debated whether women would be able to utilize their reserved seats, MARG enthusiastically answered "yes". As they took up the study, however, they discovered the big challenges facing women's empowerment. One of the problems the group encountered while doing the study was locating the elected women whom they wanted to interview. For this, the name of the husband or that of a dominant male member in the family was required. Besides, the caste of the person concerned was also needed to locate her. When information regarding these two was lacking, it became difficult to find the women.

Though Haryana is an economically prosperous state, it has a lower sex ratio than the national average. At the time of this study, the rural ratio for the state was 864. Haryana had adopted a three tier Panchayati Raj system: Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the block level and Zila Parishad at the district level. Due to the enforcement of Haryana Panchayati Raj Act (HPR Act) passed in 1994, women have been elected into offices at all the levels on reservation.

Despite this apparent empowerment of women, their social, economic and political status had not improved much. In a chapter that deals on the profile of the elected women representatives, the study states that the women still suffer from gender inequality and low self esteem. Some cases, quite lamentable yet ludicrous, are cited here. In Kutel village, the team was looking for Nirmala Devi, the woman sarpanch. They were told that the sarpanch was Raghbir Singh. It turned out that though Nirmala Devi was the elected

Rereading, Relearning

sarpanch, her husband Raghbir Singh was referred to as the sarpanch. She was known as 'Sarpanchni', which suggests that she was the sarpanch's wife!

Krishna Sandhu, the chairperson of Gharonda Panchayat Samiti, had a slightly better fate. She was an educated Jat, the dominant caste in Haryana. She belonged to a socially, economically and politically influential family settled in the town. She was known by her name and her office, so the team did not have to search for her by her husband's name.

Then there's the case of a Zilla Parishad member whose husband treated her like a puppet. When the researchers reached her house, she was alone and freely interacted with them. But the moment her husband arrived, she turned into a dumb figure, speaking only when her husband told her to. And all this despite the fact that they were living in a house that belonged to her father and all their material possessions came through her.

In the general rural set up, it is common to see women engaged in work outside their homes, like in the fields. But they would be in 'ghunghat' or purdah. This is quite a contradictory situation; women work outside their homes, but are required to keep purdah. But on analysis, this simply reflects two different sets of values of convenience laid down by the male dominated system. In fact, the men control the earnings of their women who go out to work.

In many cases, the women in the panchayats contested because others encouraged or pressurised them. But the actual decision is often taken by the husband or another male member, not the woman herself. Some of them admit that if the seat was not reserved for women, a male member from the family would have contested. Again, there are variations and exceptions in this too. Women who wish to actively participate in the political arena often have to cross big hurdles on their way. One Panchayat Samity member decided to contest on her own. She faced strong opposition from her husband and close relatives. She did all the initial works herself, from filing the nomination papers to campaigning.

When women enter the panchayats due to pressure or just because the seats are reserved, they tend to lack the motivation and knowledge required of the roles. This shows that just bringing women into the system by compulsory reservation cannot serve the intended purpose. A long history of female subordination and lack of awareness on social, political and economic issues on the part of women have held them back from effective functioning. They need to be empowered with knowledge and exposure to fulfill the responsibilities of their offices. For this, suitable training is required. The training programmes should also aim at instilling confidence and equipping them with leadership skills.

The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution and the State legislation that followed it is commendable. It has enabled women to come forward. The need now is to raise women's status in the family and society and to equip them with the efficiency to perform as members of Panchayati Raj institutions.

Onward, women's empowerment!

A Champion for Dowry Victims: Subhadra Butalia June 20, 1921– June 12, 2011



Subhadra Butalia, a valiant fighter for the rights of oppressed women, breathed her last on June 12, 2011. Born in 1921, she was just a week short of her 90 year birthday. She died in the arms of her beloved daughter, Urvashi Butalia, well known feminist and historian.

Through her book, *The Gift of a Daughter*, as well as through the organisations she founded, Stree Sangarsh and Karmika, she worked at preventing dowry deaths and for giving justice to victims.

When Subhadra was working as a lecturer in a Delhi college, she had a horrifying experience of witnessing a neighbour burned to death by her in-laws. And of all the neighbours who had stood watching the burning woman, only Subhadra Butalia agreed to testify. This incident provoked her into action, and for the next three decades she fought for the cause of victims of dowry related violence.

— Malsawmi Jacob

Prominent Radiation Oncologist: Dr Ketayun A Dinshaw November 16, 1943– August 26, 2011



Dr Ketayun A Dinshaw passed away peacefully on Friday, 26th August, 2011. 'Doctor who shaped Tata Hospital dies' goes the newspaper headline reporting her death.

She was a leading radiation oncologist who led the premier cancer-care hub of Tata Memorial Centre for 13 years. Her former student who now heads the research wing of Tata Memorial Centre in Kharghar commented that Dr Dinshaw lost her personal battle to the disease which she fought as a disciplined soldier and visionary leader for four decades.

Over the past 30 years, Dinshaw revolutionised cancer medicine in India. She was conferred the Padamshri in 2001

Dinshaw graduated from the Christian Medical College, Vellore in 1966. She then continued her training at the Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge UK, from 1970–73. She completed her diploma in radiation therapy (DMRT), and then enrolled as a Fellow of the Royal College of Radiologists (FRCR) in London. Then she returned to India and joined as staff at the Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai, in 1974, and seven years later became head of the department of radiation oncology. She was appointed director of the Tata Memorial Hospital in 1995, and two years later was selected to oversee the Tata Memorial Centre (Tata Memorial Hospital and Cancer Research Institute as well). She served as Director of this institute till 2008 and played a crucial role in shaping the institute to its present-day monumental status.

— Malsawmi Jacob

Posters

