

Examining Autonomy

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in Assam

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[**Examining Autonomy: The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in Assam** (PP 8) is the fifth in the series of research papers on the theme of Autonomy in India. Readers interested in the theme and the series can get back to **Resouces for Autonomy - Financing the Local Bodies** (PP 2), **Peace Accords as the Basis of Autonomy** (PP 3), **Debates Over Women's Autonomy** (PP 4) and **Autonomies in the North and the North East** (PP 7)]

Examining Autonomy The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in Assam

Sujata Dutta Hazarika

The desire for autonomy or self-governance in accord with their own cultural values has been central to indigenous societies throughout the colonial and independence periods. The increase in violence attendant upon the invasion of capitalist enterprises in new territories has promoted an awareness among many indigenous populations of the need for control over their lives and territories for their very survival. As women enter into these struggles to dismantle the structures of domination they become acutely aware of their own discrimination as women within their communities and families. Their drive for autonomy often takes the form of gaining control over their bodies in reproductive issues, sexuality, obtaining mobility and representation in public spheres.

In this paper I begin with a very simple question what does it really mean to be autonomous to a woman? Does it mean self-determination, morality, governmentality, accommodation, or simply a consciousness of autonomous self? There is a particular significance in examining the gendered nature of the term because while autonomy may mean all the above for a man, for a woman the effort to simply acquire the consciousness of an autonomous self may take a life time. Every step she takes towards it is swallowed by the multiple layers of “social selves” which she is expected to acquire by the society. This paper attempts to locate female autonomy in the realm of governance, (something that denotes rights, transaction, government, negotiation, and relating to others on the basis of set rules), while examining the recent 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment that ensures 33/3 % of seats to be reserved for women at every level of the 3 tiered Panchayati Raj Institution. Assam which was almost ten years late in implementing the amendment finally held the panchayat election in 2001.

This Paper primarily draws from the work on “Participation of Women in Local Self Governance in Assam” (Feb 2004-Dec 2004), sponsored by Action Aid, India which, aimed at looking into the functioning of the Panchayat Raj Institutions in Assam especially after the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution. I will first make a distinction between *numerical participation* and *autonomous participation* in governance, arguing that although numerical participation in governance can be ensured through constitutional rights and reservations, autonomous participation may not be so easily achieved. At the same time numerical participation is indeed the only powerful means to ensure autonomous participation, which can over a period of time get translated into a powerful democratic voice. Thus although 73rd and 74th amendment ensures political voice to women’s, autonomy or independent decision making is still a far cry. The paper analyses the socio-eco-cultural factors that go a long way in augmenting the success of the constitutional aim. Based on my first hand research in some of the remotest districts of Assam I have also attempted to make recommendations for effective implementations of constitutional measures with a gender dimension.

Women in North - East Politics

The status of women in North East as a whole is comparatively better than women in the rest of India. They have greater levels of mobility, economic autonomy and control over their labour than many women in other parts of India. It is a fact that women in Assam enjoy a higher status as compared to the greater Indian Society, considering that the caste society of this region is devoid of practices such as dowry, child marriage, bride burning, female infanticide, that are rampant in most parts of India. This could be primarily because society in Assam has evolved partially from a tribal background and has thus retained some traces of tribal egalitarian values. Moreover mobility of women in Assam is also far more due to factors like the absence of *purdah*, and occupational caste-groups resulting in caste flexibility. A long standing influence of the tribal work pattern where the village economy at times revolves primarily around women's labour and female entrepreneurship has resulted in a more or less egalitarian social setup devoid of sexist bias.

If this so called social elevation of women is believed to be true, to what extent is this advantage of elevated status of women through generations reflected in her role as a decision-maker in the political decision making bodies and the democratic electoral process. Or more significantly can we relate an increase in the political participation of women to a more consolidated structure of gendered autonomy in Assam.

In North East we find two simultaneous democratic institutions at work: a modern democratic system vis-à-vis a traditional system among the hill tribes. The traditional system has never recognized the rights of women as primary decision makers in matters of community concerns like inter-ethnic conflicts, crisis management, social sanctions etc and thus we have the 6 scheduled areas where women have negligible say in their institutions of Local self-governance. In Assam out of 23 districts only two fall under 6 scheduled area N.C.Hills and Karbi Anglong, the other 21 districts fall under the modern democratic institution of Panchayati raj with 33% reservation for women. The connotations for this needs to be understood in order to locate female autonomy through her participation in the wider political process. It is already understood that autonomy in terms of political decision making is absent in the 6 scheduled areas practicing traditional system of governance. This paper attempts to bring out whether democratic institutions like the Panchayati Raj Institutions have been able to ensure autonomy for women through the 73rd and 74th amendments

Autonomy in this sense will have to follow a linear path, first as a decision maker from within the premises of her household...community...village...district...state. This is so because only a particular level of consciousness of autonomous self within the family, when provided with conducive social platform for political participation and mobilization, can be translated into a truly autonomous political participation and leadership within the wider society or state.

There appears to be an inherent anomaly in the statement "women in governance". One wonders if this is really possible, years of keeping women away from governance has not only trivialised the entire issue of participating in decision making for women themselves but also for the society a large which views issues of governmentality as beyond the natural faculties bestowed to the feminine gender. From this angle one cannot but appreciate the efforts and intentions behind the 73rd and 74th amendment of the constitution which most definitely ensures political participation of women in local self governance. Numerical participation may not be the only criteria but it is a significant step towards a futuristic utopia where women through autonomous decision-making may actually make a difference in the working of a government.

Women and Panchayati Raj Institution

The Constitution passed the 73rd Amendment Act in order to revise the existing Panchayati Raj system with its structural and functional inadequacies. This act makes it mandatory on the part of the states to reserve a minimum of 33 1/3 per cent of seats to women in the Panchayat so as to involve them actively in the decision making process. In India, we call this new system the Panchayat Raj Institutions system (PRI). The Statutory reservation of seats for woman in Panchayati Raj bodies has provided an opportunity for their formal involvement in the development and political processes at the grass root level thereby enabling them to influence the decision making process in the local governments.

Thus Panchayati Raj institution (PRI) should be able to change governance in India. Women are now being elected to local councils in unprecedented numbers as a result of this amendment to the Constitution which mandate the reservation of seats for women in local government. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994 and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of government. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. By 1994, 330,000 women had entered politics as a result of PRI and many more have been elected in the last two years, with Assam participating in Panchayat election in December 2001. The percentage of women at various levels of political activity has shifted dramatically as a result of this constitutional change, from 4-5 percent before PRI to 25-40 percent after PRI.

Besides the vast quantitative difference that this is bound to achieve in terms of their numbers the difference should also be qualitative, because women bring their experience in governance of civic society into governance of the State. In this way, they make the State sensitive to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice. Every issue of governance taken up by women is ideally influenced by two sources of self-perception. First, their own sense of shared experience and 2ndly from attitudes and imagery imposed on them by the men. It appears that gender can supersede class and party lines. Women can open up the possibility for politics to have not only new faces but a new quality.

Increasing the representation of women alone may not automatically lead to a more gendered analysis of the issues confronting local government. Nor will it necessarily raise the profile of women's needs and interests in the policy agenda, given that elected women often act as proxies for men's views at the councils, being advised by their male relatives. But there is this slight possibility that a small minority of women who are in politics because of their own leadership qualities or feminist consciousness may exhibit different priorities and values in politics someday.

Some of the ways in which women, through PRI, can change governance are evident in the issues they would choose to tackle (as was evident in course of our work) eg water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence. Women also express different values. Women value proximity, whether it be to a drinking water source, a fuel source, a creche, a health centre, a court of justice or an office of administration. The enormous expansion of women's representation in decentralised government structures most of the time highlight the advantages of proximity, namely the redress of grievance and (most important of all) the ability to mobilise struggle at a local level where it is most meaningful. Thus women can help to radicalise local government.

Case Study: Assam

While Karnataka and West Bengal have experienced two full terms of women's Participation in PRI from 1994 Assam had its first experience in 2001 December, where 9903 women participated in the political process of Local self governance .As part of the project from Action Aid India the field work started with Sonitpur District of Assam, followed by Cachar and Nalbari. The districts were initially selected with an objective to firstly, provide maximum geographical representation and coverage for Assam, secondly degree of prior intervention made by any organized group in order to generate political consciousness in general and 73rd Amendment in particular.. The other specific dimensions which were considered for each district is as follows:

- a) Sonitpur - Economic backwardness in rural areas amidst a commercially flourishing Tea Belt
- b) Cachar - Geographical marginality from mainstream Assam
- c) Nalbari - Effective intervention and presence of strong mobilizing organizations
- d) Nalbari - Impact of Insurgency
- e) Cachar,Nalbari - Influence of traditional governance (Khasi and Boro) traditional system of Governance.

Although the Primary yardsticks for choosing the Panchayat/village under intervention was

- a) Distance from district headquarter
- b) Literacy rate
- c) Reserved or open Constituency
- d) Presence of women panchayat leader
- e) Economic condition
- f) Voters turn out in last elections

But in course of our secondary data from block offices we found that villages did not really exhibit any marked difference in figures regarding poverty, literacy, underdevelopment and so in order to ascertain the degree of political participation of women in Assam we chose to consider a.Whether the village was from an Open or reserved constituency (SC/ST/Women), b.Had any powerful womens organization, c.voters turn out in the last election, d. What % of women constituted the voter turn out and finally e.Distance from district headquarter as our primary yardstick. 15 villages were thus chosen from 12 panchayats as an when the variables could be applied.

Autonomous Participation of Women in Governance

What does it mean to be autonomous in Governance? It implies self-determination and the consciousness of autonomous decision making, a recognition of personal sovereignty and a need for control over ones lives and spatial territories for ones own survival. Can self –determination and consciousness of autonomy be expected of women who have been socialized to do just the contrary as part of their value system. If autonomy cannot be expected in demarcating personal space for women , in terms of mobility, sexuality, social role playing then will it be meaningful to look for her autonomy simply in the realm of political participation..If women are to seek autonomy, it has to be not just in their community and region as some dummy political participants

but the struggle has to begin by finding a voice within their homes, seeking relief from patriarchal oppression. This will be possible only when empowerment of women is achieved not just through participation in the political process alone but when this participation is backed by awareness, literacy, voting rights, constitutional reservation. It is this healthy combination that will help women to participate in political decision making in a way that will translate their aspirations into political agenda, making policies and entitlements that will contribute to their further empowerment.

On the basis of the study I have tried to unearth autonomous participation of women through the following measuring yardstick of Awareness, Decision Making, Empowerment, Participation, Aspirations

Awareness

As far as awareness of political issues are concerned (say about panchayati raj institutions and 73rd amendment) we found there is a high degree of indifference and unconcern exhibited by women in general, who simply cannot seem to understand just how political rights and constitutional provisions can make a difference to their overall deprivation and any way difficult mode of existence. This feeling was found to increase with the geographical isolation of the village, poverty and illiteracy. In the Kalain Village Panchayat, the villagers including the ward member and the President who were both women showed very little awareness about the panchayat. The lack of basic idea about the composition, functions and other activities of the panchayat was astonishing in this era of information technology. Generally speaking women only knew that panchayat should be there to solve their problems and provide facilities for the villagers. They complained that the president and the members were awarding facilities to their relatives alone while depriving the really needy. On the other hand the President defended herself saying that she is helpless as no fund or power has been transferred to her as yet. People are not aware about gaon sabha since, till day not a single gaon sabha has been held. The villagers confused gaon sabha under the panchayat with the gaon sabha under the tea garden. (In the tea garden area, every tea company form some gaon sabhas for management of the people or workers). The apathy and indifference to recognize panchayat as a viable mode of political representation was a serious matter of concern

In most villages however it was found that women regarded panchayats as something which was formed to help people in need, "panchayat" therefore meant - dwelling house, weaving equipments, ration cards and pension (old age / widow). They are in complete ignorance about the functioning of Panchayat, the associated rights and duties, or the significance of their own participation. Awareness about state level and national level political institution was limited to casting of votes to *netas* who could lure them with gifts and the excitement of visiting the nearest town free of cost (to vote) to watch a film. Political Parties and their party manifesto never meant anything and still do not mean anything. For some so called *gyani manu*, Mahatma Gandhi is just a kind old man, and Sonia Gandhi his *boga (white) boari (daughter-in-law)*

The Katigora Part iii village, under Katigora Gaon panchayat in Cachar showed a strong presence of women activists who are very active and sensitive to not only women's issues but to other socio-political, economic and environmental issues. This has created an ambience of extreme political awareness and financial independence among women. In spite of being extremely independent in their views, women basically showed very little interest to participate in political activity which they either felt was a waste of time or below dignity.

There was a high degree of awareness detected among villagers regarding their shared perception of deprivation and oppression, who they blamed on a collective raj (state), however

although some showed their animosity towards this impersonal entity others were simply complacent, accepting their destiny which is not in their own hand. Lack of standard in Health, Hygiene, and Education and gender imbalances in remuneration was particularly singled out by women as issues for immediate action.

Decision Making

This aspect was particularly found missing among all spheres of women. Be it domestic decision making in the family budget or access and control over family resources, like land, utensils, furniture, livestock, gold etc, decisions made by women were found to be of very little consequences. Some women however felt that they had more say in community property for example Temple, Road, village field etc. It was seen that once when men had wanted to use an open field for the construction of a club house, the women rebelled and forced authorities to build a primary school on it. In another case a road was constructed not to lessen the distance between the village and the highway but as desired by women to bring the drinking water source closer.

Decision –making when it came to participation in political process or community welfare was more often than not decided in consultation with male members. Husband/ Father was considered primary decision-maker, the guide who decides the course a woman decision should take because she is both vulnerable & aggressive. Just as her vulnerability needs protection, her aggression needs to be controlled. Within the Panchayat system decision making by women is a far fetched utopia.

Even among the few very vocal and emphatic women leader that we came across eg Binda rani Sinha, AP member from Burunga GP, in Cachar The AP member (Binda Rani Sinha) is very active in politics and she herself took the decision to contest in the election. She has been involved in politics from 13 years of age. Her aim is to do something for the society, especially for the women. Before the election she formed almost 60 self help groups of women, as a result of which women were empowered economically. She commented that economic empowerment influence not only in the decision making but also in the every sphere of the society. When she was asked about the problems that she faces being women in the panchayat- initially though she disagreed later on she confessed to male domination in the panchayat. She admitted that certain male centric social values, along with general ignorance about the rights/duties in Panchayat system make decision making in Panchayats difficult for women. Women are always vulnerable to character assassination.

Lady President in Kalibari Gaon Panchayat agreed that she has not that much power or capacity to take any decision by herself. The husband's permission was most essential even to contest in the election. Likewise her other activities in the panchayat is also are influenced by her husband's opinion. She also argues that women should come forward to take different activities of panchayat. Very often women kept away from meetings because either they were not informed or they were busy at home.

She posed some very important loopholes which need to be addressed if PRI is to be effective for women

Firstly, Information networks have to be strengthened. Women should be informed about reserved seats much before elections are due. This will go a long way in preparing women for the posts through training. Every aspect of panchayats should be informed to them, meetings, issues, agenda, policies and most importantly fund allocation and criteria of fund allotment should be made transparent. Finally, She complained that elected functionaries, who are mostly men approach block

officials either through open socializing or unfair means and manage to procure funds for their panchayats.

Empowerment

a. Economic empowerment

Economic empowerment has always been seen as a definite mode for achieving political empowerment. Assuming that economic empowerment of women ensures empowerment in decision making within a household, it can be argued that the same power can be translated into participation in democratic politics in the community level.

On the basis of this assumption our study has revealed that women suffer from a serious handicap when it came to actual access and control of resources like land, Utensils, furniture, livestock, gold etc. Inheritance and land rights were in most cases nil when it came to women. She enjoyed the right to maintenance as mother, widowed dependent, daughter, and wife. However In societies like tea garden labour or other tribal societies where landed property was scarce; inheritance is never a gender issue. In such cases neither sex degraded manual labour, men nor was women equal participants in earning their livelihood. This led to a belief that some degree of economic empowerment in the case of women is achieved; she could use her wage for personal things she desired to possess. In reality however she ended up spending only for the sustenance of her family, while men wiled away their money in alcohol. Alcoholism was detected as a rampant social problem, the source of many other social evils like domestic violence, sexual abuse, malnutrition, STD's etc. In many cases women spoke up vehemently against govt inability to deal with alcoholism due to its vested interest. They spoke up on the positive role played by Mahila Samities in the rehabilitation of women subjected to such trauma.

In the Boro Nunchuri Village of *Gharer Vitor Panchayat* characterized by multiethnicity and matriarchal social order too, women who were the legal property holder, could not sell or utilize the property at their will without consulting or discussing with the men. Also as seen as in the case of Cachar economic independence here did not automatically imply autonomy in decision making or political participation due to the stong hold exerted by entrenched socio-cultural values regarding women. President of Boroma Panchayat, Nalbari. Rita Dutta is a blatant example as to how when women deviate from their normal and submissive code of conduct, she can be subjected to the easiest form of violation ie infliction on her self respect and sexual modesty. She was accused by her own party male bullies of participating in pornography, subjecting her to judicial custody during which she was to undergo a virginity test.

b. Political Empowerment

Following from this it would be inappropriate to probably relate economic empowerment with political empowerment in terms of participation in political decision making. As far as the degree of political participation is concerned. We have tried to ascertain political decision making among women in three stages, Planning, Implementation and finally Delivery. In all of the stages we found that political empowerment of women could not be meaningfully understood just by ascertaining their physical presence alone. Infact participation just interms of physical presence was itself marred by a number of social factors such as illiteracy, unawareness, burden of domestic work, social and family commitments, male centric social values, fear of character assassination, etc.

The primary obstacles as delineated by women themselves which make them weak planners and policy implementers in the local self govt are firstly Lack of family and community support, Lack of financial support, The cultural barriers, Male domination in decision making, and finally Educational poverty.

Political participation if at all is thus shadowed with gross unawareness and apathy about democratic voice. There is complete ignorance regarding political rights , constitutional provisions in general and as far as panchayat raj is concerned they are totally non committing about every vital issue i.e how the funds are being utilized or the absence of the different sub-committees necessary to supervise and carry the functioning of the three-tier panchayat. A decade long absence of any such institution as Panchayat ,in their own vicinity where they could not only have exercised their voting rights but could also have influenced interventions in the fast disposal of the administrative, legislative and judicial processes of their villages is something beyond their comprehension. The wide gap in holding of elections and absence of any proper administrative mechanisms in the local level for years has erased whatever little empirical knowledge they had about panchayat from their consciousness altogether. This was one major reason why when the last election to the panchayat was held, the level of understanding about political power among the people was almost nil. Though most of the people in the villages knew their president, but overall they were vague about the different aspects of the provisions of 73rd amendment, 33% reservation, not to mention the proportionate figure of election voting. In this situation what is observed is that the level of participation in their own panchayat is totally confined to mere casting of votes,without having any say in the constitution and functioning of their panchayat.

There was also a high degree of misunderstanding and misconceptions regarding Gaon Sabha, while in certain villages like pub Gingia and Jitaline with a high number of Tea Tribe population it was often found to be misunderstood with their caste panchayat or as in some cases with the meetings held by the Tea Companies in order to inform *chai mazdoor* of Company guidelines and directives . Even Panchayat leaders mistook a gaon sabha quorum with the quorum mandatory for a panchayat meeting.

Certain panchayats eg the Burhigang Panchayat of Maralgaon Village with reserved seat for both SC and Women showed an impressive poll figure. The turnout in the last election was more than 75% and among them women accounted for 90% of the voters' turnout. In spite of this our interaction proved that as far as sustainability in politics is concerned, not a single women had a sustained interest or capacity in holding on to political positions. Not a single woman member of the panchayat wanted to take part in the election again. Most of the elected members had very low level of political awareness and their contribution to developmental activities is almost invisible. This is probably due to the fact that being reserved for women, they were forced or compelled to take part in election by their husbands or any other influential male members. Women here agreed that had it been an open constituency, not single women would have been allowed to contest the election. They believed that winning from an open constituency requires considerable amount of money power and muscle power. Some of the women who lost, again preferred to get back to the household chores, work in the land, child care etc. In the decision making in this panchayat, it has been found that the male members interfered too much and took all the credit to themselves.. Many a times women members were forced to resort to some corrupt practices by the male members either the family or the society or the panchayat. Within this short period what is found is that the women have started treating electoral politics as unwelcome and unfulfilling.

Similarly reservation at both levels in Japariguri village in Burhigang Panchayat which is dominated by Nepali, Bengali and mainstream Assamese population and is a reserved constituency

for schedule castes as well as for women, have not really helped women in raising above patriarchal domination. Neither has it awakened or enlightened the women about their political role and decision making.

Aspirations

Elected Women in most of the villages are now asking for more support by women's groups and other similar organizations for capacity building in their functioning. They demanded that more finance to panchayats should be ensured for developmental works. They also asked the help of the community to lend consent and sustained support to the panchayat activities. They wanted that funds should reach them directly and not mooted through DRDA. They demanded more developmental information from the officials. They advocated for continuance of reservation for women and in some case aspired to increase it to 50% of seats if the govt seriously wanted to combat generations of exploitation and subjugation of women. Women believed that in order to sensitize them about panchayat and constitutional rights, and ensure meaningful political participation of women, training workshops should be organized in local languages for information and political orientation.

After a series of sensitization, women openly expressed that inspite of the gaps and shortcomings, panchayat Raj is most definitely the most viable form of democratic representation. The only thing required at this stage was educating the masses about its viability, they suggested training workshops for capacity building which would include i.e. Training on

- 1 How to interact with official
- 2 Panchayat Acts
- 3 Powers of the Panchayat
- 4 Rights, duties and powers of the members/chairpersons
- 5 Working of the panchayats
- 6 Literacy and adult education
- 7 Capacity building
- 8 Knowledge on politics
- 9 Laws for women
- 10 Leadership training
- 11 Training in public relations and public speaking
- 12 Planning for development and programme implementation
- 13 Transparency in functioning for the officials
- 14 Flexibility in approach by the official
- 15 Training to develop a sympathetic attitude and resort to women's agenda and functions etc. by the officials.

Women are generally found to be deprived of many social opportunities and infrastructure mainly because of certain entrenched socio-cultural values and also because they have to be confined mostly to household activities. It is generally accepted that the infrastructure available in the village influences the lives of the majority of the people especially women. Availability of educational, health and sanitation facilities go a long way in improving the quality of life of the women. Women have indicated that lack of schools, drinking water. Health centers, sanitation facilities, market, post office, library, cultural centre or community hall etc should be major areas of concern.. The nearest school

in most cases is some 5 kms away from the village. The local sub-health centers are poorly equipped with both medicines and doctors. Child immunization and women health programme has hardly reached in the majority of the villages.

Environmental degradation in the form of large scale felling of trees is another area of concern expressed by women. Massive deforestation has led to non-availability of fuel wood in this vicinity, as a result women now has to use hydrocarbon fuel like kerosene to cook. Unfortunately this is not readily available because fair price shops are located in small townships only. The distribution of BPL card too is marred by controversy in this village. Women lamented that the deserving people were denied access of this card, and the actual beneficiaries are those who are close to the panchayat members or other influential people of the village.

73rd Amendment: Its Gender Perspective

Assam and its patriarchal society has to some extent (as can be proved by the absence of certain traditional social evils like dowry, childmarriage, sati etc) been sympathetic towards women, who although never enjoyed equal status with men but nevertheless had significant autonomy in the domestic sphere. However when we explore the political arena the study shows that women are not only hesitant and often discouraged, but they also exhibit a certain degree of political indifference along with a lack of sustained awareness. It is only in the case of a reserved seat that a woman is seen to come forward, very often coaxed or pushed by either Husband/Father or as seen in certain places by her entire family or community.

Very commonly the main reason mooted for her lack of involvement in the political domain was the huge bulk of the time which women used for domestic work, childrearing and other mundane activities. This was viewed as her primary responsibility and duty. Limiting her primary space to the hearth, more specifically to household activities pushed any social activity outside woman's domain and thereby was seen as an additional burden for a woman. She thus had an option in this sphere. Viewed as an option which was too liberating and self promoting for a woman her participation in social decision making can very well be done away with.

Traditional institutions like those present in societies with traditional governance, say among the Khasis or Bodos had never considered it important to make women participate in community affairs or empower them in economic decision making. In fact socio-cultural impediments, most of the time pushed women into a closed domestic domain burdened by mundane but extremely strenuous physical activity. Democratic institutions such as Panchayat system with its 73rd amendment has for the first time attempted to bring women into a system of governance upholding the principle of equality and justice, an institution which alone can be the most viable means of rural upliftment bringing the marginalized rural society closer to mainstream development.

Since the first time 73rd amendment was implemented in Assam was as recent as December 2001, it was very difficult to procure official records on the exact degree of participation district wise. Apparently the documentation is yet to be completed. The only record that was available from the Panchayat office, 6 mile, Guwahati recorded participation of 9902 women. Thus one cannot refute the fact that 73rd amendment has influenced the participation of women if not qualitatively but definitely in terms of preponderance. In spite of this PRI is most definitely a success, its success lies in the possibility of women transforming the State from within. I argue that this new arrangement provides the first step to converting grassroots leadership into State leadership, which many feel is the key to ushering in equitable, people-led development. What appears to be happening

is that as women enter the structures of governance in large numbers, they change these structures so that they reflect more closely the concerns of women. This is different from the usual process by which a small number of grassroots representatives are elected and can easily be isolated and forced to make compromises. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience in governance of civic society into governance of the State, in this way; they are making the State sensitive to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

Increasing the representation of women alone may not automatically lead to a more gendered analysis of the issues confronting local government. Nor will it necessarily raise the profile of women's needs and interests in the policy agenda, given that elected women often act as proxies for men's views at the councils, being advised by their male relatives. But there is this slight possibility that a small minority of women who are in politics because of their own leadership qualities or feminist consciousness may exhibit different priorities and values in politics someday..

Considering this fact we have to now protect and nurture this institution, by cleansing it of the discrepancies that plague the system. Thus while it remains a sad fact that the increased participation seems to be a mere filling up of numbers of the reserved seats. The study highlights the fact that the elected members (and the women in the areas where the study was conducted) has had very little or no knowledge whatsoever of either 73rd amendment or 33 % reservation as a mandatory inclusion in the Panchayati Raj Act. This is a result of the ignorance at every level about the Panchayat act, and the resulting duties and functions of the institution as a whole.

The Path To the future: Autonomous Participation

The primary impediments brought forth by our study are firstly,

Bureaucratic red-tapism, fund transfer through DRDA which is extremely cumbersome and time consuming, Transparency of fund transfer and percolation of incentives to BPL households has not been ensured, Scheme benefits most of the time do not filter down to those who actually need them but get diverted to those with connections, Highhandedness and condescending attitude of BDO's in their dealings with women members, finally party affiliation of candidates which today is an important criteria, so much so that powerful parties side line deserving candidates who are either independent or from other parties. Besides these factors, indifference of mainstream politics towards marginalized section not only impede political participation of women but more generally of the whole community,

Moreover major Govt Policies for overall development and capacity building of women like micro credit, literacy, infrastructural development, reproductive health care, etc have more or less suffered due to lack of sensitization of these development programmes. (In this context it is worth mentioning that though women put in equal and more often extra hours of work there exists gross disparities in remunerations. In case of tea garden women, inspite of the provision of equal wage for equal work, women were discriminated in work allocation. Heavier and thus more paying work were not given to women, making an alibi of her physical limitations. In Plucking too the permitted weight of tea leaf plucked by women was less than that allowed by men, inspite of the fact that women are still considered quality pluckers than men. The discriminations were carried out more commonly on a latent rather than manifest level)

Another vital area which has proved to be a major hinderance in womens participation is the socio-cultural systems which are obstructions to full and equal participation of women. e.g. social ostracism. There have been cases registered in Assam where elected women had to face the most

demeaning kind of character assassination and scandals. Odd working hours, and close association with male members make them easy prey to slander and sexual abuse.

In order to uphold the spirit of 73rd and 74th Amendment, basic awareness has to be generated to improve the quality of life of women in particular by eradicating poverty, illiteracy, entrenched socio-cultural values and patriarchal ideologies through sensitization and capacity building. PRI and its democratic spirit will always be out of common peoples grasp unless civil society ensures equal access to resources irrespective of sex. This will only be possible when there are other such accompanying constitutional rights to ensure this. On the other hand these measures cannot be effectively achieved without proper functioning of the local self government. We are thus faced with a situation where the, number game in the politics of democracy is not allowed to subsume the democratic spirit of panchayat system. A democratic and autonomy of women is only possible by developing social capital and human resource at the same time. It is this process of creating an autonomous self for women that is indebted to 73rd amendment, the final creation is still a dream, but its happening. Proxy representation many a times have proved that reservation is not an end in itself but a means to an end which is to ensure participation of women. Women who need to be brought forward are not those who are puppets and mouth pieces of powerful and unscrupulous male influences but those who are themselves capable of making a difference to the lives of other women like them. The Tussle between muscle and Money power also makes it difficult for honest and dedicated women to come forward.

On the basis of our work we have chalked out a possible area of intervention where self-help groups, NGO, and government institutions could intervene to generate political awareness of citizenship rights and democratic electoral process among grass-root women.

- 1 Any plan of intervention should highlight the following 7 categories
 - i Gaon Sabha Mobilisation through Street Plays and Theatres
 - ii Communication Workshops
 - iii Media workshops
 - iv Block Elected Women s Representatives Forums (BEWRF)
 - v Women Leadership Workshops
 - vi Public Opinion Building and Awareness Generation on PRI
 - vii Participation in National Level alliances and Networking
- 2 Training on Panchayat system, its functions and modules of Activity have to be organized for everyone, general public, elected members. Issues that need to be sensitized
 - i Complete Right over the subjects mentioned in 11 schedule
 - ii Compulsory elections
 - iii Immediate transfer of power
 - iv Quorum in Gaon sabha meeting should not be substituted with quorum of Panchayatmeetings
- 3 Accessibility of Information networks on health service providers and credit institutions
- 4 Strengthening Links between womens groups and elected bodies through effective networking, in order to smoothly facilitate lobbying to accrue to panchayats.

- 5 Capacity Building of women through awareness and sensitization of vital issues without depending solely on Reservation.
- 6 Formation of SHG groups which aim at savings and thrift to collectively raise economic concerns before panchayat justifiably.
- 7 Last but most important is Infrastructural Development ,like ensuring basic facilities of Health, Sanitation, Education for women in order to boost their confidence and Morale, and help them combat the burden of certain entrenched cultural and religious values which has for generations subjected her to a double structure of exploitation, one in her domestic domain and the other as part of a wider male –centric value system.
- 8 Forming womens organization or other such groups as supervisory bodies for
 - ensuring that the women are not marginalised in the revenue and expenditure committee structures that will emerge to manage the development in these bodies;
 - ensuring the devolution of project design and monitoring powers from central government to the elected bodies, so that the latter can develop their own policies, reflecting the views of their own representatives rather than those of central government, and be held accountable for them;
 - strengthening the identity and feminist consciousness of women representatives, for example, by leadership training;
 - building global coalitions through the activist, as distinct from the academic mode. This includes bringing women into political structures and supporting the backward and forward linkages of women's presence in politics, linking household and family priorities with macro-planning processes;
 - pressing for South Asian regional economic cooperation amongst women to be based on regional support to empowering woman's role in local and national governance;
 - campaigns and training programmes to prepare the women both as electors and elected; and urging multi- and bi-lateral agencies to revise their own patriarchal structures.

Conclusion

Thus we can conclude that inspite of the widely held conviction of the elevated social status of women in Assam, in reality their condition is only marginally better than their counterparts in other places of India. The primary reasons are poverty, Illiteracy, entrenched customs and traditions. In order for women to break this barrier and come out into the open to freely voice and participate in

the political arena would need to exert immense mental and Physical strength. This strength can be achieved only when economic status improves with education and awareness regarding problems and their solutions. Education at this point appears to be the only solution to break the shackles of archaic beliefs and tradition, gender bias, superstitions etc.

Implementation of the 73rd amendment in Assam though at this point seems to have just about managed to increase participation of women in politics only numerically, without really contributing in a changing governance qualitatively however its significance in long term participation of women in mainstream politics and decision making cannot be ignored. This study highlights an undeniable feature that with better access to the Knowledge of the Panchayat act, its rights and duties, training and capacity building of women alike the institution alone can be the most viable means of rural upliftment but could also bring the marginalized rural society closer to mainstream development.

One cannot deny that there are many obstacles to the realisation of PRI's transformative potential in the sense of creating autonomy at every individual level. Firstly there continues to be a resistance to really devolving power and funds from centres of (male) power to the periphery. Women still face considerable handicaps to their involvement in politics; for example, inadequate education, the burden of reproductive and productive roles, a lack of self-confidence and the opposition of entrenched cultural and religious views. There is thus a need to provide women with specific kinds of infrastructure and information support which will go beyond technical training, Like equal access to resources, support to build solidarity amongst women, by strengthening links between women's organisations and elected bodies. They need information about innovative organisations which enhance women's lives such as health providers and credit institutions. It is also necessary to strengthen women's sense of common identity by articulating the elements of a feminist consciousness and presenting it as the special quality of women's leadership. There has been insufficient elaboration of what that leadership has to offer which distinguishes it from men's leadership and which commends it as something special. Such an elaboration through feminist discourse and action is essential for this revolution to deliver the promise it holds. There is also a need for a more enabling environment, which would allow PRI to become a process for the empowerment of women through the development of human capital. Such an environment would include legal frameworks and services as well as packages of technical support.

Table 1: Choice of Villages / Panchayat and Their Parameters

VILLAGE	Yardstick for Selection				Reserved Constituency (SC/ST)	Reserved Constituency (Women)	Multiethnicity	Voters Turnout in Panchayat	Women voters
	Illiteracy	Womens Organisation Active NGO	Geographical						
Phase1	SONITPUR DISTRICT								
Maralgaon				T	T	T	70%	88%	
Japariguri				T	T	T	80%	88%	
Bhirgaon		T					75%	90%	
Pub Gingia					T	T			
Mainoushre	Special Case study	study - Impact of Insurgency , geographical isolation, and impact of intervention							
Sonajuli		T							
Phase 11	CACHAR DISTRICT								
VILLAGE									
Boro Nunchuri			Border Village		Open constituency	T	88%	90%	
Jitaline					T	T	70%		
Borkhola part I	High Literacy	Strong WO		T		T	75%		
Burunga					T	T	80%		
Katigora Part II		StrongWO			T				
Phase 111	NALBARI DISTRICT								
VILLAGE									
Nankar Vaira		Strong WO	T		T		80%		
Jajia bari					T	T			
Khudra bistupur			T		T	T	72%		
Sahanpur			T						
Chand Kuchi (Suba Kudamtal)			T		T				