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**Women, Political Parties and Decentralized Governments:  
Case Studies of Women Leaders in India and Cambodia**

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## **Women, Political Parties and Decentralized Governments: Case Studies of Women Leaders in India and Cambodia**

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### **1. Introduction**

Decentralized decision making and stronger roles of local governments have been promoted in many countries on grounds of various merits. As Stigler pointed out in 1957 (cited in Shah with Shah 2006:3), the closer a representative government is to the people, the better it works. Local governments are supposed to understand the concerns of local residents and are more responsive to citizens' problems and more effective in delivery of services (Harilal 2008; Patnaik 2005; Oates 1972 cited in Shah with Shah 2006:4). It has been recognized that inclusion of women in these local government bodies that decide and implements policies closest to the everyday life of people in the community is effective, thanks to strong advocacies from women's movements.

India has passed laws under the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment in 1992 that make it mandatory for the local governments to include women members in the local government bodies. One third of the seats in local bodies, i.e. Village Panchayats are reserved for women. This reservation of seats, in 1993-94 elections, has brought about 800,000 women into the political process in single election. Since then, many provinces in India have followed this quota system in the local self government's election at the district, sub-district and panchayat levels. On the other hand, in Cambodia, there is now higher acceptance and recognition of women's role and contribution in governance. The decentralization process in Cambodia took place since mid-1990s, but was further strengthened through the establishment of Commune (administrative unit consisting of four to seven villages) Councils and its first election in 2002.

The quantitative achievements are visible. The ratio of women in local government decision making bodies has increased. For example, in India, while women occupied only 7.9% in the Lok Sabha (lower house of the parliament of India), at the level of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), 40% of Gram (village) Panchayat chairpersons were women, thanks to the quota system (Raman 2002). In Cambodia, women Commune Council (CC) members occupied only 8% in the first CC election in year 2002, but it increased to 15% in the 2007 election. In India, states like Karnataka, Gujarat and West Bengal, elected women in local governments has far exceeded the 33% reservation limit. This shows that women are now getting elected from those seats which are not reserved for them.

Some critical questions however arise from the increased presence of women in local government bodies in the two countries. Whether poor women's voices and needs are

now better heard than before? Does decentralization process support poor women to express their needs and have better bargaining power in the society?

Many have also questioned the actual change decentralization and increase in women elected members have brought about in terms of empowerment of women. Has higher ratio of women in local government lead to better addressing of women's problems, or has it improved women's position in politics, and has it made any change in the way local politics are practiced? Or is it simply causing more stigmatization to women politicians (Fleschenberg 2005)? These are larger questions, which cannot be answered since the increase of women in local government is still a recent phenomenon. This study aimed to explore the trajectory of how the present women leaders in local government bodies became leaders, and how they performed after they were elected. This is not to evaluate the effectiveness of their performance, since it is too early to assess them, but to learn from the choices that they have made to understand what the women leaders are up against in local government institutions.

The study analyzed women in local governments in Orissa (India) and Kandal, (Cambodia). India and Cambodia have both pressed for decentralization, and there is a strong move to increase the number of women in local governments. India has a rotating quota for women in Panchayati Raj Institution. In Cambodia, there is no quota system, except for voluntary quota that political parties introduce for their candidates. Both countries are different in terms of gender equality and control over women and their behaviour. Orissa, India being more upright in the control, while in Kandal, Cambodia, the control is more subtle. At the same time, women's movement is much stronger and deeper in India than in Cambodia. Level of political culture is also quite different in Orissa and in Kandal. In Orissa, almost all villagers in the community we studied are party members, and many actively get involved in election campaigns. In Kandal, this is not the case. In Cambodia, participation in election itself is still new in history, having the first general election only in 1993. Through the comparison between such different situations, we aim to show that political culture that hinders women's participation exists regardless of the quota system is place for women. We aim to explore the struggles of the elected women candidates in the context of the local government institutions. When they are not able to fight directly, they take to alternative routes of participation and thereby attempt to change local governance.

## **2. Women's political participation in local government institutions**

Many studies have discussed and identified problems faced by women in participating in local government institutions. Low education, their lack of experience and shyness to articulate in meetings, their weaker economic status (Ambedkar and Nagendra 2006:56), time constraint because they need to balance work and family responsibilities (Pintat 1998) which is aggravated when the meeting place is far away or when they organize meeting at inconvenient timings (McGrew et. al 2004), and a political culture entrenched in muscle power. As Pintat (1998:6) says "politics is associated with a specific system of values and practices which women find so alienating and daunting that they feel either excluded or reluctant to engage in it."

Quota or reservation of seats for women has been introduced to fast track the process of women's participation. While the debate on pros and cons of quota system has been lively (see for example, Dahlerup 2005; Rai 1999), Hust (2002) concluded that materially, nothing has changed so far with more women in local governments. As Raman (2002) and Hust (2002) herself noted, there have been several symbolic achievements. The enthusiasm with which women embraced the opportunities of participation demolished the myth that women were uninterested in politics. Hust (2002) in her paper on Orissa, reported that 70% of elected women expressed their willingness to remain in politics after their present term is over. The participation also boosted women's self-esteem tremendously. Raman (2002) pointed out that in India, about 40% of the women who could become member of local government institutions were from marginalized sections of the society, showing that the process did work to provide space to these women. Women who entered such political positions were supported by their family and kins, and many times there is a vested interest by the latter. Several instances have been observed where women are present as proxy candidates and are puppets in the hands of their male kin (spouse, brother or father) . Raman (2002:7) also cautions that the fact that women's reservation is now accepted by ruling elites with ease and women's movement no longer perceived as a threat is "a result of the cooption of gender issues both by the state and the NGOs".

Even with or without quota and its stigmatization, once women are in the local government institutions, there are more problems that they have to face. Firstly, women do not attend meetings regularly or raise problems in meetings (Patnaik 2005). This comes from their inexperience in public speaking and lack of confidence. Secondly, the scope of decision making at the local government level itself is already limited. As Hust (2002) mentions, decision making is not only dependent on gender, but also on the political culture. Decision that can be made independently at the local level can be very limited. Financial and conceptual space is limited at the lowest political level. Thus, with such limitations, Hust (2002:15) pointed out that women members are not able to come up with "revolutionary new preferences".

Thirdly, even when they speak in meetings, women find it difficult to raise women's issues out of fear of losing support of male voters. Hust (2002) described how PRI women thought restricting drinking as an important agenda but could not implement it because she was afraid that men supporters will go against her. Thus, elected women were not able to articulate their group-specific interest in panchayat decision making (Patnaik 2005). Fourthly, often there is a divide between women's group and elected women. Survey of women MPs in India showed that none have come into political life through the women's movement (Rai 1999). Many savings groups that are organized by NGOs often do not discuss other problems outside savings, and did not contribute to supporting elected female members of the local government (Hust 2002). Linked with this, fifthly, is the question which category of women, these elected women represent.

Finally women elected members of local government tend to be restricted by existing political culture, and if they are not connected to or receive support from women's groups and movements, it would be difficult to go against or change the political culture. This shows the double restriction in their participation in local government institutions. Patnaik (2005) identified two ways in which elected representative participate in the panchayats: one is through panchayat meetings, and the other is

through interaction with their constituents. Elected women seem to be restricted in both types of participation. In this study, we will examine how women's participation in these two areas is actually restricted in both India and Cambodia, and how women react to these restrictions. Our hypothesis is that both quota women in India and non-quota women in Cambodia, faced with restrictions in the former type of participation, try to strengthen the latter type of participation. Even though they are not from the women's groups, their restricted experience in the local government might, ironically, lead them closer to women's groups.

### **3. Methodology of the study**

In order to understand the hindrances that women elected leader in local governments face and how they try to fight them, we have conducted a comparative study between India and Cambodia. As discussed above, India and Cambodia are politically and culturally very different. In terms of women's participation in local governments, we would highlight two differences (1) while India introduced quota for women, Cambodia did not, (2) women's participation in decentralized local government bodies were introduced much earlier in India than in Cambodia. At the same time, in these two countries, central governments have emphasized women's participation in local government bodies: in India, this is manifested in its amendment in constitution, and in Cambodia, it is manifested in its rectangular strategy as well as its National Development Plan. In India, there is a strong women's movement from central to the local level. In Cambodia, even though women's movement is still in its infant stage, there is a strong policy advocacy from NGOs from central to the local level on gender equality and women's participation. We find that such similarities and differences will allow us to understand better the functioning of local governments in terms of women's participation when there is good support from the national policy and civil society.

In India, the state of Orissa was selected and in Cambodia, Kandal province was selected. Orissa was selected since it is one of the poorest states in India, and economically would not be very different from rural Cambodia. In Cambodia, Kandal province was selected since it is near Phnom Penh, thus economically it is not desparately poor, and also the local governments are functioning better compared to more remote provinces. Another reason was the location of the second author in Orissa, and the third author close to Phnom Penh. Below, we will provide how the actual study area was selected and the methods used for data collection.

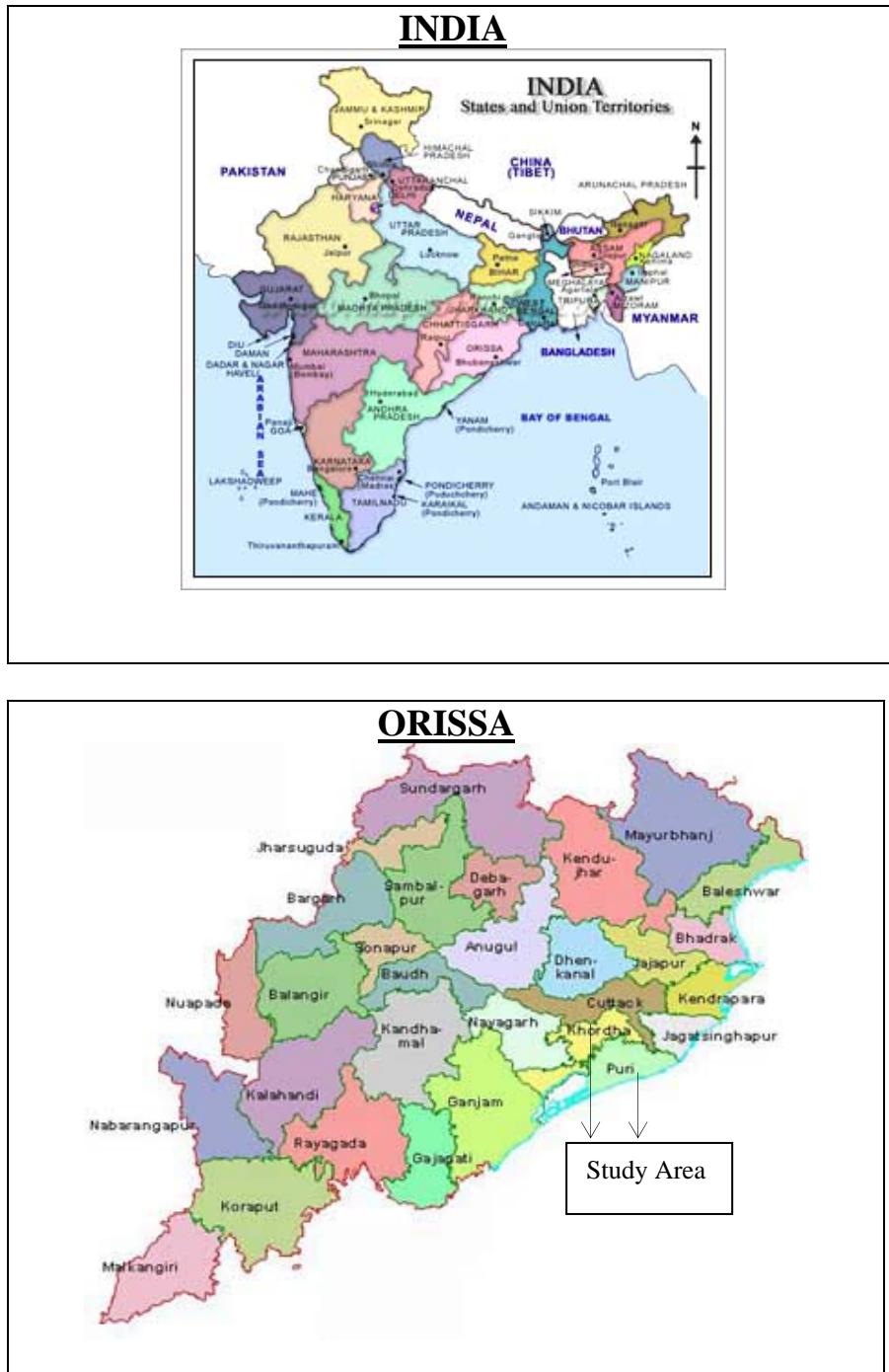
#### **3.1. Orissa, India**

The present study was carried out in the state of Orissa (eastern part of India). The State is characterized by extreme backwardness and underdevelopment. It has a population of 43 million (year 2007). High level of poverty is due to factors like low literacy, low sex ratio of 971 females per 1000 males, low agricultural productivity and large scale unemployment exists. The overall literacy rate has increased by about 15 percentage points, between 1991 to 2001 (from 49 percent to 63 percent). However, as per the 2001 census, Orissa still ranks at 24 from the total figure of 29 states. The government has initiated several measures to tackle the issue of under-development. A host of poverty alleviation programmes like National Rural Employment Guarantee

Act (NREGA), Sampoorna Grameen Swarozgar Yojna (SGSY), Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Yojna (PMGSY), to name a few, have been launched in the state. Employment opportunities are created through these developmental programmes.

The study was carried out in the *Satyabadi* block of *Puri* district and *Tangi* block of *Khurda* district in the state of Orissa. The selection of the study area was done with the support of two NGOs namely *Society for Women Action and Development (SWAD)* in *Satyabadi* block and *Centre for Action Research and Documentation (CARD)* in *Tangi* block respectively. The two NGOs have been involved in training elected women panchayati raj representatives. Figure 1 gives the map and location of the study areas.

Figure 1: Map of study area in Orissa, India



Source: <http://www.maps-india.com/images/India-map.jpg>

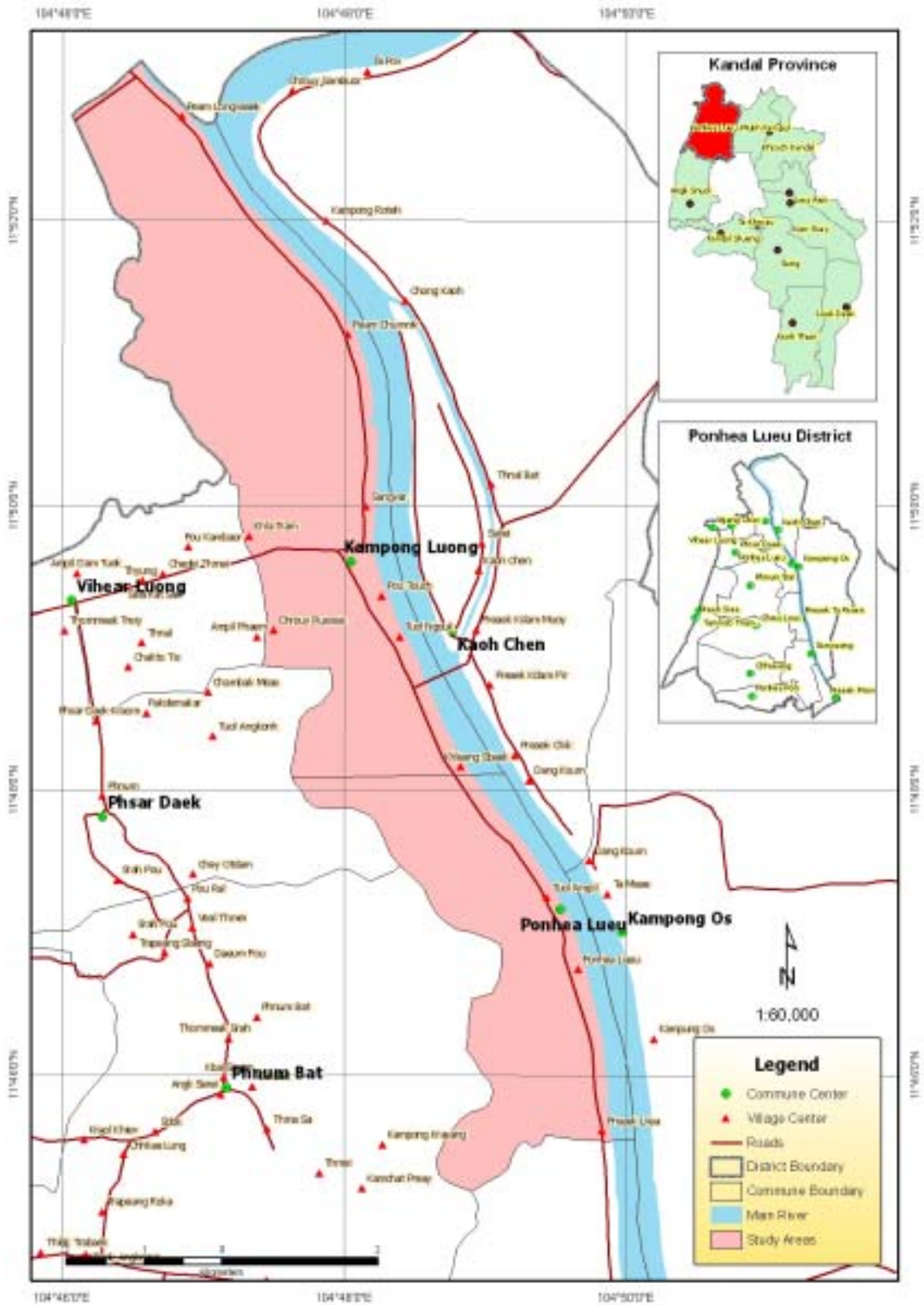
We conducted case studies of women leaders in two panchayats and two women's federation. Some reconnaissance visits were made before finalization of the actual sample. These visits were carried out with the purpose of understanding the nuances of how local governance institutions function. The data collection was done through in-depth interview of women leaders and group discussions.

### 3.2. Kandal, Cambodia

In Kandal province, Ponhea Leu district were selected. See Figure 2 for the location of the study area. Ponhea Leu district is one of the 11 districts in Kandal province, which is 33km north of capital Phnom Penh. Ponhea Leu district consists of 14 communes and 141 villages. As of 2007, the total population was 108,553 persons, of which 52.8% were women. Around 25% of the total 21,736 households were female-headed. Majority of the households in the district (92%) were engaged in agriculture, mainly rice production.



Figure 2: Map of study area in Kandal, Cambodia



In the first commune council election in 2002, there were only seven women who were elected as council members among the 110 members in 14 communes in Ponhea Leu district. Of the seven, two were first deputy chief, while the rest were members. This increased to 22 women in the second election in 2007. Among them, three were first deputy chief, one was second deputy chief, and 18 were members.

The study was in Ponhea Leu commune (746 households) and Kampong Loung commune (1855 households). These communes were recommended by the district office, since they had higher number and more active women commune council members compared to other communes. In the 2007 election in Ponhea Leu Commune, one woman was elected among the five commune council members. She is currently first deputy chief of the Commune Council. In Kampong Loung Commune, there are four<sup>1</sup> women members among the eleven<sup>2</sup>, of which one is a second deputy chief and three are members.

The study interviewed all the five women commune council members in these two communes. In order to understand the role of women commune council members, we also interviewed nine women in village committees, and conducted two group discussions with commune council members, as well as three group discussion with villagers selected by the village committees. Other than that, key informant interviews were conducted with male commune council members, chief of district office of women affairs, and officers in Ministry of Women's Affairs and NGOs, as well as political parties (Cambodian People Party and Sam Rainsy Party).

#### **4. Local governments and election system in India**

Change in the system of governance was witnessed in 1952, when the Government of India launched an ambitious countywide programme on community development and national extension services. As a part of this initiative, the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1958) was setup, which recommended the creation of a three-tier structure of local governance (known as Panchayati Raj Institutions or PRIs) with people participation at all levels, as one of the ways decentralization should be envisaged. The report of the Committee defines decentralization as “process whereby the government divests itself completely of certain duties and responsibilities and devolves them on to some other authority within its jurisdiction, reserving to itself only the functions of guidance, supervision and higher planning” (Sansristi : 2005-06).

The three-tier structure comprised of the panchayat at village level, panchayat samiti at block level and zilla parishad at district level. However, due to discrepancies in the formulation of plans, this exercise met with little success. Although the focus was on creating local institution of governance, and thereby granting people the right to engage in governance, the process through which this was to be achieved was still highly bureaucratic. There was limited space for people to really participate and

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<sup>1</sup> Two of them are from CPP, one is from SRP, and one from NRP. Two are widows, one is married, and one has a disabled husband. Two of them are in their 40s, and two are in their 50s. All of them have a high school education.

<sup>2</sup> Of the eleven, seven are from CPP, three from SRP, and one from NRP.

create governance structures that met their needs. They merely served as functionaries with no decision making power. However, with policy changes over a period of time, the role of the PRIs changed from mere delivery agencies to power sharing structures having decision making capacity, especially with the passage of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment by the Parliament of India. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment dealt with the PRIs in the rural areas, while the 74<sup>th</sup> amendment was concerned with urban governing bodies.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment has conferred a constitutional status on local self governance at the grassroots level. It has provided the Panchayati Raj institutions with the power to 'enable them to function as institutions of self-government'. In fact, the Panchayati Raj institutions provided under the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, federal continuum through which power devolves from Centre to States and then to District, Block and Village levels (Sinha 2004 : ix). This translates into a decentralized hierarchy of three tiers for local self-governance, consisting of the Zilla Parishad at the district level, Panchayat Samiti at the intermediate level and Gram Panchayat at the village level. It was suggested that for democracy to be more transparent, accountable and participative, citizens should be a part of it.

People's participation meant making the process of governance inclusive in terms of bringing on board the existing socially excluded groups such as women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, ethnic minorities and other. It was thought that such representation would help in addressing their marginalization.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment prescribes for 33% reservations for women, Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Caste (SCs) in the local bodies. The reservation of seats for women (and for STs and SCs) concerns not only members but also office-bearers. This means that not only one-third elected members but also one-third elected sarpanch (panchayat head) or chairman (panchayat samiti head) or president (zilla parishad head) have to be women. Each state is required to establish a State Finance Commission (SFC) to determine the share of resources to be allocated to the panchayats every five years. The Eleventh Schedule of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment lists 29 subjects where panchayats are deemed to have special responsibility, covering a broad range of rural development functions that are intended to be under the control of elected representatives (Robinson 2005:11). The amendment further states that elections should be held every five years. The structure and function of PRIs in India including Orissa are the same.

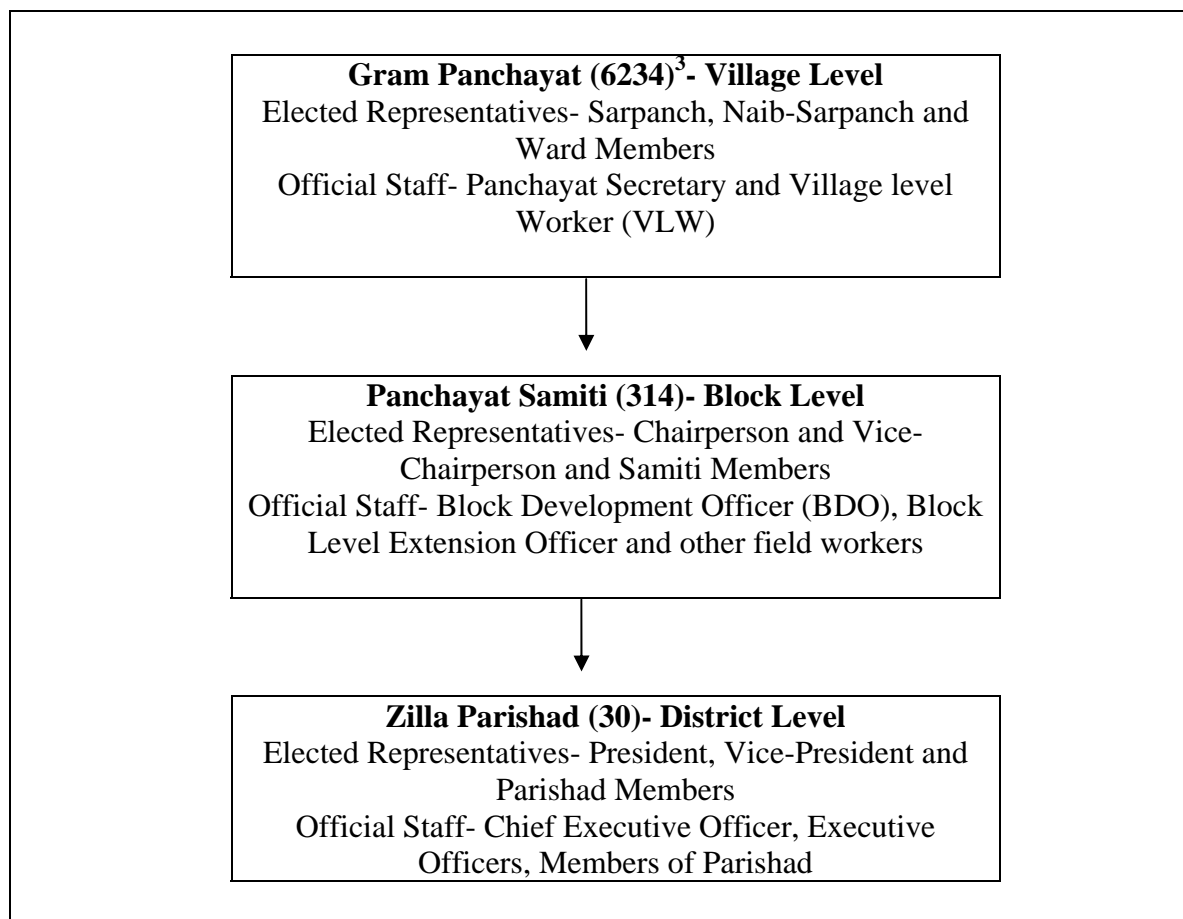
The structure of the three tier Panchayati Raj institutions is as follows (ISED 1994:16),

- **Gram Panchayat**- Village-level council, covering one or more villages, depending on the total number of the population and consisting of 10-20 elected ward members led by the Sarpanch and Naib-Sarpanch. While the Sarpanch and ward members are elected directly, the Naib-Sarpanch is elected indirectly from among the elected ward members.
- **Panchayat Samiti**- An intermediate body at the block level, and forming the second tier of the system, the Panchayat Samiti has jurisdiction over all the Gram Panchayats, falling within the block. It has around 10-25 members Samiti members, including the Member of the State Legislative Assembly (MLA), who elect a Chairperson and Vice- Chairperson.

- **Zilla Parishad**- The third and the apex tier, covering the entire district and consisting of 10-35 Parishad members, including the Member of State Legislative Assembly (MLA) and the Member of Parliament (MP), who elect a President and Vice-President.

Figure 3 gives an idea of the three tier panchayati raj system with reference to Orissa.

**Figure 3: The Three Tier Panchayati Raj System in India (e.g Orissa)**



In an attempt to revitalize the Panchayati Raj (PR) bodies, the Orissa Government in 1991 passed three important Acts, viz., Orissa Gram Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1991, the Orissa Panchayat Samiti (Amendment) Act, 1991 and the Orissa Zilla Parishad Act, 1991 and ushered in a new era for PR bodies and vested them with powers to engage in rural development through people's participation. Elections were held during 1992 for Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis as per the provisions of the amended Act of 1991. All the above Acts were further amended to bring them in conformity with provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993. The new Act came into force from April 1994. The three-tier PRIs as per the 1993 Act came into existence after the elections were held during the year 1997 (ibid: 12).

<sup>3</sup> Source, <http://www.orissapanchayat.gov.in/English/default.asp>

## 5. Local governments and election system in Cambodia

The first general election was held in Cambodia in 1993. Since 1996, SEILA program, which worked for devolution of economic power and establishment of locally-elected village/ commune development committees, was established. This laid ground to local level planning and administration, which was formalized into the establishment of Commune Council as the first popularly elected governing body at the local level (McGrew et. al 2004). The first Commune Council election was held on February 2, 2002 in 1,621 communes across the country. In April 1, 2007, the second Commune Council election was held. The legal mandate of Commune Council is for five years.

The number of Commune Council members depends on the population of the commune. It has a chief, and two deputy chiefs. Role of Commune Councils as stipulated in the Law on Administrative and Management of Commune/Sangkats<sup>4</sup> (LAMC) is to:

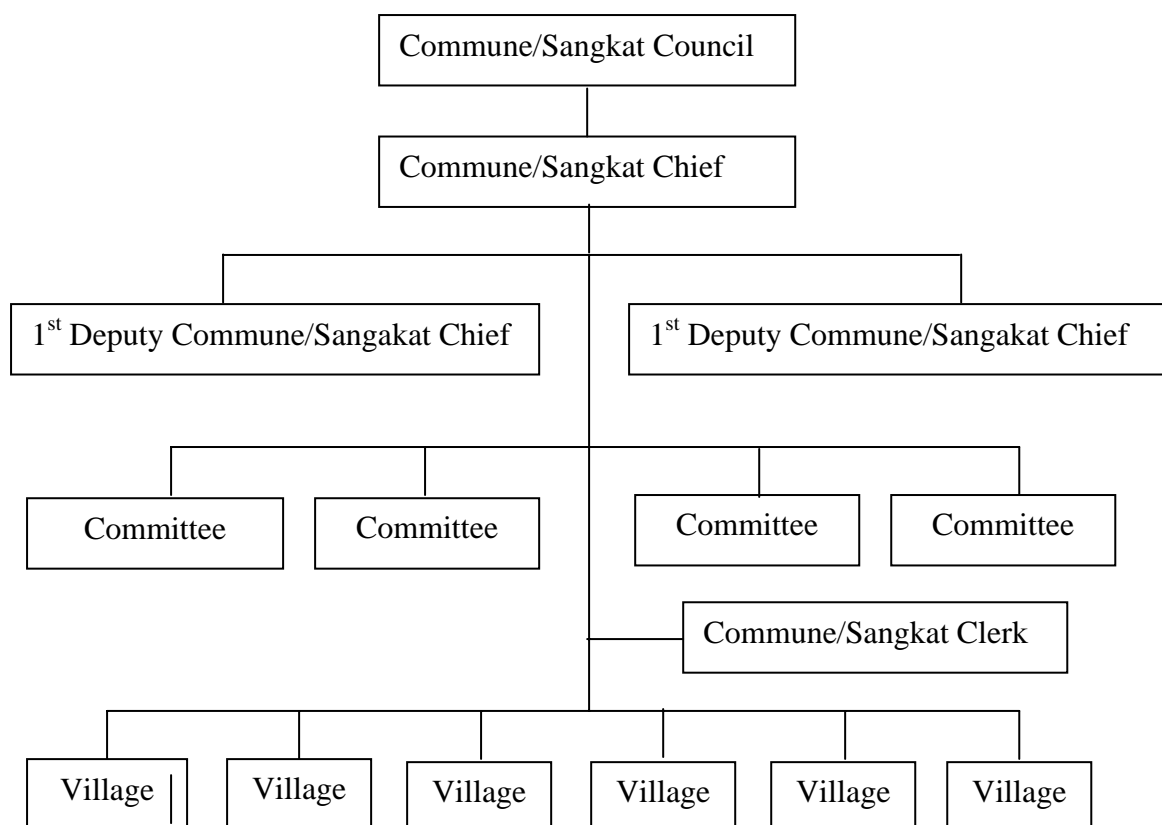
- ❖ Maintain security and public order
- ❖ Arrange or provide for public services
- ❖ Promote the contentment and well-being of citizens
- ❖ Promote social and economic development within the commune and upgrade the living standards of citizens
- ❖ Protect and preserve the environment, natural resources and national cultural heritage
- ❖ Promote mutual tolerance and understanding among citizens, and
- ❖ Perform general affairs to meet the needs of citizens.

They are expected to accomplish many of these tasks through commune planning process. Commune Council members are expected to lead the participatory planning process, finalize the commune investment plans, and present at the district integration workshop, where harmonization of planned investment and activities are done among communes, districts, provincial governments, NGOs and other donors. Figure 4 shows the structure of the Commune Council.

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<sup>4</sup> In the rural areas, the lowest level of local government is called commune. In the urban areas, they are called Sangkat.

**Figure 4: A structure of the Commune/Sangkat Council**



**Source:** Commune/Sangkat Administration and Management, April 2007

During commune election, voters need to vote for a particular political party and not the individual. Each political party, prior to election, will put on public, the names of party list candidates. According to the Regulation and law on Commune/ Sangkat council election issues in 2007 (article 4.11), chief of commune council is the person who is at the top of the list of the political party that gained the largest number of votes during the election. The first deputy will go to the candidate from the second winning party, and the second deputy seat will go to the third winning party. If there is no third party, the first winning party will also take this seat.

Commune Council have a committee system to divide their work responsibilities. In all communes, key committees such the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) and Procurement Committee are established. Many Commune Councils have formed women’s affairs committees. Other committees have been established depending upon the activities undertaken by the Commune Council, such as committee for road or water well maintenance, informal education and implementation of various Commune Council projects. Council members commonly chair the committees. The implementation of Commune Council functions including planning process are supported by district office staff called District Facilitation Teams (DFTs).

It is up to the political parties to make their party list for commune election<sup>5</sup>. During the last commune council election, there were four major parties that contested in the Communes under this study: Cambodian People Party (CPP), Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), FUNCINPEC party, and Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP). During this election, CPP had a pre-election (*Steap Stong*) process<sup>6</sup> in which they identified popular candidates. In each commune, CPP asked its party members to select three members for commune council candidates, one of which should be a woman. This has greatly helped women to get their names in the list and get votes. Based on this pre-election in the commune, CPP ranked candidates and constructed party list. Once they are in the list, election campaigns were supported by the party, both in terms of finance and materials.

SRP also tried to promote women. They encouraged women to stand as their candidate by giving women cash awards depending on the rank in the list (first rank 250USD, second 200 USD, third 150 USD)<sup>7</sup>.

The number of women candidates and elected women has increased considerably from the first election as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: Women candidates and elected women in 2002 to 2007 Commune/Sangkat election (whole country)**

<b>Description</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2007</b>
Number of Candidates	75,226	102,401
Number of Female candidates	12, 044	21, 396
Percentage of Female candidates	16%	21%
Number of women in the top 3 in the party list	1,161	2,328
Number of Candidates elected	11,261	11,353
Number of Female candidates elected	983	1,662
Percentage of Female candidates elected	8.5%	15%

**Source:** SILIKA, 2007

## **6. Women leaders in Orissa, India: The Cases**

The study was carried out in two panchayats i.e. Biswanthapur panchayat and Mahura panchayat. The case of Biswanthapur panchayat is where a schedule caste<sup>8</sup> woman was elected as sarpanch. This helps in understanding how gender and caste identities

<sup>5</sup> Unlike in India, there is no quota for women in Cambodia. Human rights groups proposed a quota system for the 2003 National Assembly election, but could not gather support (McGrew et. al 2004). After lobby from women's groups, political parties agreed in principle to a quota system for candidates. But women were generally put at the bottom of the list (ibid).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with leader of CPP in Ponhea Leu district on 19 November 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with leader of SRP in Ponhea Leu district on 26 November 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Scheduled Caste is a categorization of people who are placed at the lowest rung of the Hindu Varna (Caste) system. They are considered as impure on account of their hierarchical occupation (mainly scavenging), thus rendering them as untouchables.

interplay in Indian politics. The second case is Mahura Panchayat, where a woman sarpanch (village council head) belonging to a backward class<sup>9</sup> held office for one term. The third case is a former PRI member who actively committed herself to organizing women SHGs. The fourth case is a woman leader of a women's SHG federation, which rejected being incorporated into PRI.

#### Case 1: Ashalata Behra of Biswanathpur Panchayat

Ashalata's case can best serve as an example of low caste women's entry into the panchayat. Ashalata is a scheduled caste woman who has been in the Biwanathpur panchayat for the past two terms. She first contested as a ward member in 2002. In that term she was elected as Naib-Sarpanch (Deputy Sarpanch and is selected from among the elected ward members). In 2007 when the Sarpanch seat of the panchayat was reserved for woman, she again contested and won.

Ashalata is well aware of how caste plays a crucial role in politics at the local level. Considering the scenario where the upper castes dominate politics, it becomes very significant to examine how low caste women participate in politics. According to her,

*"I would not have contested if there was no reservation. I did not have the confidence to enter into politics. Moreover, being from a low caste was another factor which discouraged me".*

It is in instances like these that reservations have shown positive results. In such cases reservations not only promote gender equality but also address the issue of caste.

Ashalata has been able to sustain her position in politics largely due to the support of her brother-in-law. It was at his behest that she decided to contest elections and has remained politically active. She however denies being a proxy sarpanch and instead states that it is very difficult for a woman to function alone in politics. Support from family and kin is crucial. As the local governance system is often riddled with corruption, it is difficult for a woman to handle things alone. The brother-in-law is also very open about his support. For him it is a matter of family pride and he feels that since his sister-in-law is the sarpanch, it is very essential that she should have the full support and cooperation of her family.

Ashalata's case can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly it can be seen as a case of a proxy candidate. Ashalata had been used by her family to gain political mileage. The brother-in-law wanted to contest but since the seat was reserved, Ashalata was forced to step in. Secondly, being from a low caste, the family support assumes significant importance. A low caste status makes it difficult to function in the panchayat. The caste feelings always creep in. She recalls an incident when a road had to be constructed in front of a temple. A part of the road had to be constructed over the temple area. For this it was important to enter the temple and inspect the area which was to be converted into a road. Ashalata being the sarpanch had full authority to enter the temple and conduct the inspection. However, the upper caste people of the panchayat protested such a move, saying that Ashalata had defiled tradition. Although

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<sup>9</sup> According to the Constitution of India, those groups that are socially and educationally backward within the territory of India are referred to as Other Backward Classes (OBC).



constitutionally Ashalata had the right to enter but customarily she was stopped. She then called a meeting of the panchayat where the issue was raised. She got the support from her caste members and also from the administration. The role played by her brother-in-law was instrumental. It was he who put the issue in front of the administration and demanded that effective action should be taken against the upper caste men. His support was crucial to her position as Sarpanch. From this incident it can be assumed that the fight against oppression operates at two levels. One is the gender identity and the other caste identity. Ashalata used her caste identity to get support for the panchayat work. Though Ashalata could have herself fought over the issue, she did not have the courage and the confidence to do it and hence sought the support of her family and caste members. Therefore it can be interpreted that Ashalata was being used as a proxy (by her family and caste members) but this was done to achieve justice against caste exploitation<sup>10</sup>.

At this juncture, it would be important to discuss the question of proxy which plays a role in local governance. Proxy does indeed defeat the purpose of empowerment of women. But such a statement is very context dependent. In a patriarchal society like rural Orissa, during the initial stages of a political career, women do indeed become proxies; however with sustained participation they can evolve themselves as independent political actors. Ashalata's case is one, where being a proxy has helped her in addressing the issue of caste exploitation. Therefore being a proxy in local governance has benefited her caste members. But it is important that this becomes a means through which she not only addresses caste exploitation but also uses her identity to resist gender exploitation. However, her sustainability in politics is important. On the other hand, she is very skeptical of being politically active for long. According to her,

*“Politics is overburdening. A woman needs to devote time to both her household and public responsibilities. If the balance is not proper then she is held responsible for shortcomings, if any. My engagement in politics has resulted in neglecting my family. I do not want this to happen. Therefore, I do not intend to be active in politics for long”.*

Discussions with two female ward members of the panchayat also revealed overburdening of work as a major factor which hindered their participation. After being elected to the panchayat, their primary responsibility was household work, especially without any sharing option. Men did not help women in household tasks as it was considered to be a female domain. However, they were always eager to help in the panchayat works. Managing both the public and the private life took a heavy toll on these women. Besides overburdening of work, corruption was another major factor constraining women's political participation. Women were not comfortable with politics which thrives on money and muscle power. They were very conscious about their status and prestige in the public life. It affected their work as they were not willing to compromise on their values and principles and adopt unscrupulous means to get their job done.

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<sup>10</sup> We do not intend to go into the discussion on whether gender identity was surpassed at the cost of caste identity, but then it should be kept in mind that in conditions where gender identity is not strong, other identities assume significance.

Case 2: Snehalata Mohapatra of Mahura Panchayat

Snehalata Mohapatra belongs to a backward caste (OBC). She comes from a politically active family. Both her husband and brother-in-law were supporters of a national party i.e. *Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP)*. In 2002, when the Sarpanch post was declared to be a women's seat, Snehalata was persuaded by her family members to contest for the position. Snehalata states that

*"I always wanted to be in politics. Being from a political family, I had an interest in such affairs. In fact I used to go for campaigning during elections in our area. But I had never thought of contesting as it would have been difficult. Considering our situation, it is difficult for a women to contest and win without reservations. The males will never want that a woman should participate in politics".*

Her political ambitions were nurtured through active participation in a Self Help Group (SHG). Snehalata belonged to the "*Maa Swapaneshwari Swangasahayaka Gosthi*" SHG in her village. The association with the SHG gave her exposure in public dealings and confidence in conducting herself in the public domain. She has participated in several training and awareness generation programmes.

Snehalata won the election largely due to the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - a national level political party. The party did not give her monetary support but provided banners, pushing cards and organized rallies. The support was due to the fact that her husband was a party member. He was able to mobilize votes because of his party affiliation. The response of how the election process was organized was described by her husband. According to him,

*"Party politics has assumed a significant place in panchayat elections. Although the candidates in the panchayats do not contest on the basis of party symbols, they get support in terms of finance and other logistics which is very crucial for winning. Without such support one cannot contest in panchayat elections these days. In the current times, one cannot remain active in panchayats without political support. Although at the time of contesting, we have the chance of selecting the party whose support we want, but later we have to support the party that is in power. If we do not do so, it becomes difficult to function as sarpanch. We always have to maintain good rapport with the local Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) as he is the one who has a key role to play in the development works like roads, tubewells, community centre, schools etc. which comes to the panchayat. Selection of a political party for support is also done after careful examination of their position in the village. In our village we have 150 houses. All of them are divided along political party lines. Another advantage of getting political support is that you do not have to be engaged in personal campaigning. This is because, all political parties have some leaders in every village. The support from a political party automatically extends to support from these leaders in the form of campaigning and motivating people to support them through votes. We need to go around all villages once so that the people see the candidate. Rest of the campaigning is done by the political leaders".*

The case highlights two important aspects. One is the influence of national politics in the panchayat elections. The panchayat elections are fought on the basis of party lines. Although the idea was that panchayats should be self-reliant institutions with their own system of governance, in reality, they have come to be a site where the dynamics of national politics gets manifested. Panchayats are no longer autonomous governing institutions. Their functioning is dictated by party affiliations of its members. The other aspect is the role of woman in the election process where they are not given the autonomy to fight their own candidature. It is the others (mostly men), who decide how the contest should be planned, whose support is crucial, how to mobilize votes and so on. For Snehalata, it was more important to support her caste, party or family rather than supporting a gender cause. She laments,

*“If a women contests election then I would support her only if she belongs to my party. Party loyalty is very important for me. I do not see her as a woman per se but as someone who belongs to a political outfit”.*

Discussion with some ward members of Mahura Panchayat helped in identifying factors like lack of capacity building, rotation system, corruption etc, as some of the constraints inhibiting women’s political participation. They felt that it is the responsibility of the government to see that capacity building measures are initiated for elected women representatives. Women cannot function efficiently if they do not have the proper support mechanisms. It should be kept in mind that a majority of women have entered into public domain for the first time. Many of them are also illiterates. So it is very inappropriate on the part of the others to dismiss women as being inefficient.

### Case 3: Binapani Mishra

Binapani Mishra’s case helps in understanding how women emerge as leaders through their political participation. As was in the earlier two cases, Binapani’s entry into politics in 1993 was at the behest of her family members. She was made to contest for the post of ward member as the seat was reserved. The election was fought with the support of the *Orissa Communist Party (OCP)*, a break away faction of the Communist Party. Binapani’s brother-in-law was a member of OCP. This helped her candidature as all the requirements for contesting elections mainly finance and canvassing for votes was taken care of by him. Binapani was simply asked to meet all members of wards for seeking support.

Prior to her entry in politics, Binapani was a member of a Self Help Group (SHG) in her village. The SHG was formed with the support of an NGO. Being a member of the SHG, Binapani used to attend training campaigns organized by the NGO. It helped her getting some exposure and developing contacts with other people. However, Binapani admits that this had little contribution in her decision to enter politics. It was mainly due to family pressure that she got involved in politics.

Her term as ward member was short lived. The panchayat got dissolved after three years of its commencement. Her experience during these three years was not very encouraging as she was not aware of how the system functions, and also her roles and

responsibilities. She was just physically present without any fruitful engagements. This had caused much disillusionment for her.

Binapani was already exposed to the outside world and she was not willing to let herself get tied up with the household responsibilities only. She wanted to engage herself in some public activities. Binapani admits that there was a desire within her to step out of the house and engage in some meaningful public work. She wanted to work for the development of her village. This urge forced her to join a NGO. During her tenure in the NGO, she was engaged in activities like forming SHGs, developing training modules, organizing women for small scale income generating activities and other village development works.

When the elections were declared in 1997, Binapani was encouraged to contest. Although she was very reluctant, she contested. She had to leave the job with the NGO. She contested for the post of panchayat samiti member and remained active till 2002. There after she withdrew from formal politics. The main reason cited by her was that politics is dirty. There is a lot of corruption and favoritism involved. One is never allowed to work independently and has to follow the party guidelines at each stage. This at many times is done at the cost of overlooking one's own interests. According to Binapani,

*“Being a woman it becomes all the more difficult as people always point fingers at you. Lot of lose talks goes around. Your name gets maligned easily. This is in turn affects the family honour. It is due to reasons like these that I do not want to enter formal politics again”.*

However, Binapani has not given up her determination to work for the people. Post political life, Binapani has been instrumental in forming SHGs. She has been going around villages and organizing SHGs. She feels that SHGs have been a great source of strength for poor women. They are at least able to earn a income and take care of the families.

Binapani has been successful in establishing a federation i.e. the *Panchayat Stariya Mission Sakti Federation*. This is a federation comprising of 18 SHGs in Badapari Village, Tangi block, Khurda District. It was formed in the year 2004. People recognize her as a leader who has the capacity to influence and motivate others. She has been able to bring women together and work collectively. The federation is involved in activities such as road construction, pond lease and midday meal scheme undertaken by the panchayat. The federation has evolved as an important development agency at the local level as it is keen to work for the upliftment of the village. Such works have helped the federation to generate some revenue which can be used by members as credit. Such an exercise serves a two way purpose. Besides meeting the needs of the federation, it has helped in the development of the panchayat as well. The federation meets on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of every month to discuss about their activities.

This has resulted in the emergence of a strong women political constituency who indeed play a decisive role in formal politics. Presently when elections are declared, be it at the panchayat level, or state or national level, Binapani is approached by political parties for canvassing. Such parties also realize her importance and try to

utilize her persona to gain political mileage. Binapani is well aware of the importance of her current position as a woman leader. Many women look up to her as their role model. She is happy with the recognition she has achieved. However, she does not intend to be politically active again. She wants to concentrate on the federation work and enhance its efficiency. She does not want to engage in politics as it will create unwanted divisions, affecting the functioning of the federation. According to Binapani, none of the federation members are into politics. She says that,

*“If the members want, they can be politically active. There is no such rule in the federation that will prevent them from doing so. But presently none of the members are politically active”.*

Such a statement reiterates the fact that women are reluctant to participate in politics. As these women are members of a federation, they have the potential and opportunity to be in politics. However, political participation is not preferred by many. Entering politics means supporting a party ideology. This does not stop at the political level but also gets translated into other engagements as well. So if women become active in politics in all likelihood they may bring in their political views and ideas into the federation. Binapani states,

*“This will not be accepted by other members and will give rise to unwanted divisions, thus affecting the functioning of the federation”.*

The members are also aware of the privileges which the federation can get if some of its members enter into politics. For example, the office of the federation was constructed when one of its leaders was a member of the panchayat. The land was granted after much persuasion in the panchayat. It was possible because one the leaders was a member of the panchayat. Thus political presence does facilitate promoting federation activities.

The federation has become an important vote bank for party politics as well. During elections, many parties approach the leaders of the federation for mobilizing votes. The politicians are well aware of the capacity of the leaders to fetch vote for them. They try to influence the leaders in order to garner support of the federation members.

#### Case 4: Laxmi Sethi and the Mahila Mahasangha

Laxmi Sethi is a scheduled caste woman. She has never been active in politics. However, she is very active in the women’s federation. Laxmi has been able to unite women and develop a collective, which has strengthened over the years. Laxmi’s entry into the public sphere was due to her participation in “Pragiti Samiti” SHG (in which all members are schedule caste women).

She recounts how her involvement in the SHG was not viewed favourably by her family members. Her association with the SHG necessitated her participation in training programmes and meetings. At times it resulted in staying out of home till late hours which was not accepted by the family and they discouraged Laxmi from getting involved in the federation activities. However, for Laxmi it was her grit and determination that prompted her to carry on with her work. Laxmi has been a guiding

force for many village women. She has encouraged women to come together and work as a collective. She has been able to motivate them to form SHGs and work towards augmenting their economic capabilities. Laxmi emerges as a woman leader because of her capability to organize women as a collective. Her efforts have paid off with the setting up of a women's federation. Laxmi realizes that women need to be organized into a collective if they want to empower themselves. This is important because collective identity is created on account of shared interests. Women being in a subordinate position, have similar interests. Considering their position in society, these interests can be addressed effectively, when there is a collective voice. It is this vision and collective voice that has resulted in the growth of the *Mahasakti Mahila Mahasangha*<sup>11</sup>, with Laxmi being the secretary of the federation.

The Mahila Mahasangha (literal meaning is women's collective) is a organisation of 70 members belonging to Self Help Groups in Jeypore village, Sakhigopal block of Puri district. It was formed in 2002. The organization of women into Mahila Mahasangha is symbolic. Before the contitution of the Mahila Mahasangha, the women of this village were members of Self Help Groups (SHG) which was formed with the facilitation of a local NGO *Society for Women Action and Development (SWAD)*. The primary objective of the SHGs was to engage in some income generating activities such as making broomsticks, coir mats, vegetable plantation, horticulture etc. This helped the women to earn some money and supplement the household income. However, such type of engagements did not translate into forming a critical mass of women that could have a say in decision making the village level. An example could be cited on how small SHGs at village level were not allowed to diversify their activities like taking up important works in the village (like lease right for aquaculture in ponds, road construction). Being limited in scope, with neither the competency nor efficiency, these SHGs could not expand. It was under such circumstances that these SHGs came together and organized themselves into Mahila Mahasangha, and Laxmi was instrumental in getting women together.

It was felt that such an exercise would help women to put forth their demands as a collective and project a strong voice. It is important to note that there was solidarity of interests among all the SHGs. Their main objective was to make women self reliant which was to be achieved by two means. One is by making women more visible in public domain. Women had to step out of their houses and engage in village level public activities. This visibility would provide women the legitimacy to participate in the public domain. The visibility will also facilitate in addressing their needs. It is well known that lack of visibility pushes women's agenda into the periphery. Women's needs and concerns are not given priority which further marginalizes their socially constructed peripheral position. Secondly, it is important to build up their visibility in order to create a collective voice for them. This would help accepting women's constituency and make them equal participants in the process of development.

A case of a conflict over use of pond in the village is cited to understand the dynamics of women's participation in the public domain as a collective. Since its inception, one of the major achievements of the Mahila Mahasangha has been the pond issue in the

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<sup>11</sup> A Mahila Mahasangha is a women's community federation that allows for the mobilization of women to work on issues that affect their daily lives.

village. The pond which lies at the centre of the village is owned by the panchayat. However, the panchayat has not put any effort for its maintenance. As a result it has accumulated algae, weeds and planktons. Besides becoming a breeding ground for snakes, the water was neither suitable for domestic use. Women of the village were worst affected as they are the ones who are responsible for collection of water. After repeated appeals to the panchayat and their failure to get it cleaned up, the Mahasangha took up the initiative of cleaning the pond. After the pond was cleaned there were several groups such as the Panchayat, Block Development Officer and Caste Council in the village interested to take up the lease rights for aquaculture purpose. The Mahila Mahasangha also put forth its claim for the lease rights. After a long struggle, the Mahasangha finally got the lease rights with the due support of the present Sarpanch.

National politics has deeply percolated into local governance at the panchayat level as well. The situation is such that, without party support, elections cannot happen at the village level. The contestants have to depend on political parties for election funding. The entire process starting from filing of nomination, to campaigning, to mobilizing people and organizing rallies is conducted by the political parties.

Politics also affects the development works undertaken by the panchayat. Factions are formed on the basis of political affiliations that lead to internal fights in the gram sabha (village) and palli sabha (hamlet). Such disputes have become a normal feature of local governance. According to some members of the Mahila Mahasangha, such practices are disrupting the village life and solidarity. Villagers get influenced by politics and conspire against each other. This has led to conflict and resentment, with no consensus on substantive matters.

The Mahila Mahasangha is well aware of such manipulative politics. They do not want to be a part of it. They feel that if they get involved, it will hamper the work of their group. Divisions will occur in the federation and it will be difficult to function. One such incident which portrays women's reluctance to politics is as follows. During the course of the discussion, the Vice Chairman of the Panchayat Samiti of Sakhigopal block came to meet the women of the federation. She wanted them to participate in a protest meeting organized by the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Satyabadi constituency. She informed the Mahila Mahasangha that the protest was organized because some funds allotted for an agriculture loan was getting transferred to some other block. However, the women of the Mahila Mahasangha were not keen to participate in the protest meeting. They recalled an earlier incident with the MLA where they were humiliated in a meeting.

Such instances reveal how a women's group is used by political parties to further their vested interests. The focus of the party is on getting the numbers to participate in the protest meeting. This would enhance the credibility of the protest. Such incidents repeatedly take place. However, it is for petty gains like these that the political parties approach women's group. They try to get their own work done by using women's groups. Such excessive interference of party politics is resented by women. There is no genuine concern to address their issues. Party issues takes over women's concerns. Consequently women's issues get sidelined. One mahasangha women stated,

*“Since long time we have been listening to men. Now we do not want that. We want to do things on our own”.*

The President of the Mahila Mahasangha *Laxmi Sethy* states,

*“I do not want to be in politics. Participation in politics requires supporting a party ideology. This at many times results in compromising on your values and principles and accommodating yourself to the party dictates. I am not ready for it. I am happy to continue my work in the Mahila Mahasangha. Here we work according to our prerogatives. We are not dictated by outsiders. We would like to continue this way”.*

## **7. Women leaders in Kandal, Cambodia: The Cases**

The first case is about a CPP member council member, who while serving her constituency, finds it difficult to let her voice be heard. The second case is a SRP member, who gets discouraged by the marginalization she experiences as a woman member from a minority party. The third case is a CPP member, who was more or less assigned the job, and is not very keen to participate in the council. The fourth case is a NRP member, who originally stepped into politics as a proxy for her husband, but was able to connect to her constituency and utilize it for her political leverage. The fifth case is a CPP member, who, with number of years of experience, was not able to find her place for participation in the local government.

### Case 1: Heng Mlup of Kampong Loung Commune

Heng Mlup is 52 years old, has completed eleventh grade education, and lives with her husband who works as a district police, and five children, who all go to high school. She works not only as a commune council member, but also as a Women and Children Focal Point of the Commune, and also does wholesale business in fish. Before, she was elected as the member of the council she was running the business full time, since the early 1990s. Her family is one of the better-off ones in the commune. She owns a house, one hectare of paddy land, and has a monthly income of 300 USD from her business. Now, being a commune council member, she receives a 70,000 riel payment per month.

Heng is a member of CPP since 1998. She used to be a head of Women’s Association<sup>12</sup> in the commune. Ever since she was a child, she wanted to enter politics. The people in the commune know her well, as a person with empathy towards people’s problems. For instance, if there are people who face urgent need of money, they come to borrow from her because they know that she will help. In the first commune election, her name was not in the party list, because she was too busy with her business. But, in the second election, with her family’s financial situation being stable, she was prepared to run for the commune council member. She attended some

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<sup>12</sup> Women’s Association is a mass organization of the socialist party during the 1980s. After market liberalization and embracing multi-party democracy, women’s association ceased to exist officially. However, in the village/ commune level, they still appointed women’s association heads and vice heads till quite recently. After the mass organization was abolished, they functioned more as a women’s desk in the village / commune authorities.



training sessions on women's issues. She has good oratory skills and can conduct herself confidently in public. She was also the president of parent teacher association of the school. Since she was active in community activities, CPP included her in the pre-election candidate list, and she was finally elected as commune council member in 2007.

*'Actually, I want to be the top in the candidate list of political party, because I thought that I am a strong woman and feel privileged to receive encouragement and support from my husband, friends and villagers in the commune. I have a good network in the party. I wanted to volunteer to be a candidate in the pre-election of the party. I contacted the leader of the party to get an idea about the process of election. The leader of the party in the commune also intended to ask me to stand for pre-election. The leader thought that I will be elected because of my background and my popularity in the commune. But I think the political party are still sceptical about my sex and capacity to function as a council member. My party appointed me in the fifth rank in the list after pre-election of the party. And then I was elected to be female council member, and a Women and Children Focal Point in the commune. I tell you frankly that I am not satisfied with this rank. I will do my best to get top rank of candidate list in the next commune election. I come to work in commune office every working day and try to resolve problems of villagers especially women and children in the community'.*

Heng worked very hard as a commune council member and as a Women and Children Focal Point. She also performed certain administrative work for the community members, such as issuing birth and marriage certificate. However, female members, according to her, were not given enough right and decision-making power in the affairs of the commune council. Every time she expresses her opinions and ideas in the monthly commune council meeting, she faced some reaction or opposition towards her. She worked for her position as commune council member for seven months already, but she is disappointed that the commune council is not able to respond to the people's demand.

*'Of course, I am a female council member in charge of women and children's affairs in the commune, so I have no power to raise any ideas or take decisions in other development activities in the commune. I have limited decision making power. Frankly speaking, I am not satisfied with the chief of commune even though we belong to the same political party. Very often, in monthly meetings, there are some issues to approve like development activities in the commune. We need to discuss these because we have eleven members from three different political parties. Some time I have double tasks to do, female council member being second deputy of commune, and (since) member of commune (council) from opposition political parties hold the (other deputy) positions, so it is difficult for me often to complete works on time (because I have to coordinate with them). I come to work regularly. Importantly, when people especially women or children have any problem in the commune, I will take it up urgently to solve for them. For example there were two rape cases in the villages which I took up and helped the victims as much as I could'. (Interview on November 2007)(words in bracket are added for the ease of understanding)*

Heng has good relationship with other female council members regardless of their political party affiliation. She wants many women to become Commune Council members. However, she acknowledges that women face more problems in pursuing the position, such as lack of support from family and society, low education level, and being too shy to express their opinion in public places. She gave other women advices and encouragement to stand for their rights in place in decision making institutions.

*‘There are only four female commune council members in this commune. However, it is good compared with the first election. There was only one female commune council member. In my point of view, I would like to encourage more women to participate in politics or involve themselves in public sphere like work in local government and work for people in the community. But there are many constraints for them as I see, for example, some women want to work in public sphere but they think their living standard are low, no support from their husband and family. They explain that their husband will not allow them to spend money that they earn for political campaign activities, and their husband want them to take responsibilities in household only, like taking care children, and cooking. Moreover, they are of the view that they have limited education because of Khmer Rouge regime. Anyway, I still do encourage them; I gave them some advices that they should use their right now because currently women are strongly encouraged to work in local government or public sphere’. (Interview in November 2007)*

CPP supported her political campaign strongly. Her husband and family encouraged and supported her financially and spent time for her campaign<sup>13</sup>.

*‘Luckily, my political party is strong not only in power but in providing financial support as well. During political campaign, almost all activities were paid by the party. For example, provision of transportation (car and bus) and mobilising people to join the rally. My husband and family also spent some money to buy rice to distribute to people in the community. (Interview in November 2007)*

Heng represents many of the new women elected members, who do not have specific political goals to work on, but who, by being elected, find some merit in occupying in the position. She feels that the position boosts her position in the society, though she also realizes that there is little that she can do from inside the system. She turns herself to helping people as well as encouraging more women to join politics and finds being such role model as the most satisfying as a commune council member.

## Case 2: Nem Phoeun of Kampong Loung Commune

Before becoming a commune council member, Nem Phoeun, 49 years old, was a full-time farmer and housewife. Her husband became disabled in the 1990s, and is currently jobless. She has four children: three sons are engaged dry rice farming and

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<sup>13</sup> In Cambodia, local election campaigns are all about distribution of goods. It is crucial to have financial support as well as network where it can be effectively distributed.

her daughter is studying in high school. She has her own house and one hectare of land farming. She was educated up to the eleventh grade.

Nem became a member of the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) ever since it was established. She is of the view that SRP works for justice. Other male members of SRP said that it is difficult to get women candidates for the party, because it is an opposition party, and there has been harassments and killings reported against SRP candidates in other places. It was Nem's determination and trust to the vision of the party that she decided to be a SRP candidate. The leader of the party and ex-second deputy of commune council contacted her directly to encourage her to be in the candidate list.

*'I thought that I was encouraged and supported by my party. I really love the party. I have volunteered to be a SRP member. I hope the party will help the people to improve their living standard and eliminate corruption in the commune. I never miss the meeting of the party in Phnom Penh. There was no reaction from other people in the community when I stood from the opposition party. I was elected to be a female council member finally'. (Interview in November 2007)*

SRP men commune council members, being the minority, normally talk loudly to make their voices heard. However, Nem Phoeun rarely raises any idea or expresses opinions on decisions during the monthly commune council meetings. She feels that other council members look down on her because she is from a minority party. As a woman of minority party, she feels that she is not given any opportunity, such as participation in trainings. The only training that she could ever attend was the one where all female council members were required to attend. She said that she is never assigned any work from Chief of Commune Council. Such disappointment discourages her to even reach out to her constituency. She never goes to meet or solve the problems for villagers. She said that she is not confident, and does not have experience to work for people. So, she keeps silent.

It seems that Nem Phoeun was highly motivated to serve the commune before she was elected. She realized the difficulty in working inside the commune council as a woman and as a member of minority party. Since the party was also too weak to support her, she felt lonely and discouraged, and could not find opportunities for participation and make herself useful.

### Case 3: Peng Vuchsim of Kampong Loung Commune

Peng Vuchsim, 50 years old, is a divorcee for more than 15 years. She has four children: one son and one daughter are studying in University in Phnom Penh living with her sister, and two are living with her studying high school in the commune. She has completed tenth grade education. She is the sole breadwinner of the household. She runs a small business, which earns her approximately 90,0000 riel (around 230 USD) per month. She belongs to the middle income category in the community.

She used to be a vice-chief of Women's Association in the commune in 2000. She was appointed by the district to take up this position. She was told that they appointed her because she has good behaviour, worked hard for her children, and never had any

conflict with other people in the commune. In the first Commune Council election in 2002, her name was included in the party list of CPP, but was not elected. In the second commune council election in 2007, her name was again included in the party list of CPP. She was invited by an NGO Women for Prosperity to attend the training on how to stand in the higher rank in candidate lists. Finally, she was elected to be a commune council member.

*‘I am a member of the CPP since 1993. I think because of my family background, my behaviour and education, I could be listed in the candidate list of the party for the first commune election. But I told the party I was busy in selling meals to support my children to study; I could not work for the commune. Then, I was listed nearly at the bottom of the candidate list. So, I was not elected in the first commune election. The new policy of the party in the commune for the second (commune) election required that at least 30 percent of those listed in the candidate list be women. It is hard to choose good women representatives in the list in the commune. (Based on) the result of pre-election of the party, the party decided to list me again in the party list. In the end, the final result of second election, I was elected to be a female council in Kampong Long commune.*

She has a good relationship with all members in the commune. She is not engaged in day to day work of the commune, and rarely comes to work in commune office. She said that when the chief or members call her, then she will come to join. However, she attends all the monthly meeting of the Commune Council. She said that she was still not clear about her tasks in the commune, even when she was assigned to be a vice-chief of women and children focus point, and a facilitator to solve domestic conflicts. She did not feel comfortable to raise any idea in the meeting, because she thinks she had limited knowledge about the work of the council, and other “important” issues. She also did not have confidence in how to work for people “properly”. She says that she strongly encouraged other women to participate in the politics and public sphere especially women having good knowledge, skill, health, and close relationship with people in the commune, but for she herself:

*‘For the next mandate, I do not want to continue my work because of my illness and age’*

Peng Vuchsim has gone for office with strong support and recognition from the party. However, working culture of commune council did not inspire her to work, or have encouraged her to participate in decision making. Without inspiration and motivation, she feels tired to continue her work in the local government, foregoing the opportunity of being in the local government.

#### Case 4: Yous Sner of Kampong Loung Commune

Yous Sner, age 56 years old, is a widow since 2003. She is one of the rare women who served two terms as commune council member. She has her own house and eleven children. Only seven are living with her, four still in school and three are working to support the family. She finished tenth grade education.

From 1993 to 1997, her husband was the chief of the FUNCIPEC party in the commune. When he was seriously ill in 1998, she was appointed to replace her husband although against her will. In 2001, she was invited by the NGO Women for Prosperity to attend three training sessions about women in politics. Her name was included in the party list for the first commune election in 2002. At that time, she had conflict with members of the party about her rank in the candidate list. Since she thought she had capacity, she tried to convince other members to put her on the first rank in the list. In the end, the members agreed and she could be listed as first rank candidate of the party. In the first Commune Council election, the party helped her to conduct political campaigning. She was elected to be the first deputy chief of the Commune Council, and Women and Children's Affairs Focus Point.

In the second commune election in 2007, she changed her political party affiliation to NRP – a new and weak party. She was listed as first rank candidate in the party list. She said that she did not feel any discouragement or opposition from the people in the commune to be a member of NRP. Before the election, she spent much time and money (her family's money, 1 million Riel – around 260 USD) for political campaigning activities. She thought and believed that many people in the commune loved her and villagers were satisfied with what she did while in position after the first election. So, she was confident that even when she stood for a weak party, and she could still be voted by the people in the commune. In the second election, she was elected to be a second deputy chief of the Commune Council.

Yous is very regular in attending the commune office. She indicated that being an only member of a weak party, it is difficult to be heard. Council members listen to her when she raises issues and give suggestions for development activities in the monthly meeting, but nobody follows the idea, and none of them gets implemented. However, she says that she has good relationship with all, especially with all women council members not only in this commune but also in other communes of this district.

She has a lot of experience in working for the people and settling conflicts in the commune. When land conflict arose between group of villagers and a real estate developer, she stepped in and tried to help the victims. She claims that she resolved 40 cases of domestic conflicts and domestic violence in the commune. She could step in and mediate properly herself, and never did she have to bother to depend on high level authorities to solve the problem. She described how she was upset with the chief of commune council when he dismissed rape cases as trivial. When she wanted to discuss with him about the rape cases of young women in the commune to find the solutions to help the victims, he did not show any interest or willingness to solve these problems. Yous thinks it is important to improve the capacity of women council members. She wants some organizations to put efforts to encourage more women to participate in politics and public domain, without being affiliated to any political party.

Yous Sner is a capable and motivated council member. In her case, she came into politics replacing her husband. But through her political activities, she became more engaged in politics. The restriction that she faces come more from her party affiliation, than from her sex. She has a strong conviction that by serving the people especially women in the commune, she will be able to continue having influence in the commune. Without such confidence in politics, it would have been difficult for her to move to NRP.

## Case 5: Van Yorn of Ponhea Leu Commune

Van Yorn, 48 years old, is a divorcee since 1979. She lives with her daughter and two grandchildren. She owns a house and 32a of land for farming. She has completed tenth grade education. She is a tailor and her daughter is selling corn in front of their house.

After the first commune election, she was appointed to be a Women and Children's Affairs Focal Point. She was not a commune council member, but since there was no woman in the Commune Council, she was asked to take up this position<sup>14</sup>. During the time she was the Focal Point, she was invited to attend many workshops and training related to gender issues in the district and in capital city, Phnom Penh. This has given her exposure to work in the commune. She is a member of CPP. During the second Commune Council election, CPP asked her to stand as candidate in the party list. At first, she did not want to stand, but after attending a capacity building workshop on how to run in elections by NGO Women for Prosperity, she changed her mind. She was supported by her whole family, friends and people in the commune, and based on the result of pre-election, the party decided to rank her as the second candidate in the party list. CPP supported all logistics and finance for the political campaign. Finally, she was elected to be the first deputy chief of Commune Council.

Even though Yous has already served one term as Women and Children Affairs Focal Point, she is still not clear about the duties of Commune Council member. She is also not clear of what authority she has as a first deputy chief. Further, she has problems in functioning in the Commune Council structure, and is unable to find avenues to participate effectively. At the moment, she is not yet too discouraged to move out, but there seems to be little motivation for her to continue except for her improved self-image self-confidence that has been nurtured by the support from the political party.

### **8. Political parties, women's groups, and women elected leaders**

The increase in women politicians at the local government level is considered to be important to enhance the visibility of women's needs and address them through the state. However, as discussed in the beginning of this paper, there are several challenges for women politicians, in view of the nature of participation in local government decision which can be quite restricted. As discussed in the cases, women in local political institutions gain enhanced self-confidence, improve their self-image as well as their standing in the community, and often obtain higher political consciousness. However, does this lead to women having more voices?

What is clear from the two country cases is the importance of the role of political parties in local government elections. In Orissa, although there were attempts not to

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<sup>14</sup> It is not a must to have a woman in this position. However, in many commune councils where there is no woman member, they appointed a woman from outside the council to serve in this post. If there is a woman council member, automatically she was assigned the post. The non-elected Women and Children's Affairs Focal Point did not have any voting or decision making rights in the Council, and their positions were low, making it difficult for them to work effectively.

allow the influence of political parties, but in reality election campaigns cannot be carried out without the support of the same. In Kandal, Cambodia however, the design of the election system itself was already based on political party lines and therefore individual credibility alone is given less importance. Such situations restrict the role of elected members in local governments, but at the same time, the support from political parties has been instrumental to get all the women whom we interviewed to come on board. As Pintat (1998) mentions, recognition from the party is the most useful and effective way for women politicians to rise.

The extent of the control of the political party from the central level can be linked to the reason why men politicians are more lenient in giving out seats to women in the local governments, while in the central parliament, that is not the case. In both Cambodia and India, in the national parliament, there is no quota for women. The ratio of women politicians in national parliament is low compared to the local governments in both countries. In Cambodia, it is 9.8% in the 2003 election, while in India, it is 8.8 % in 2004<sup>15</sup>. While the conditions at national level are stringent, at the local level, India has women's quota, and the dominant political party in Cambodia introduced a candidate selection system which makes it easier for women to be ranked high in the party list. Since the local government can be controlled by national level political parties, and because the scope for decision making in local government is still very limited<sup>16</sup>, giving seats to women (especially to keep them in the minority) do not become a threat to the central political power structure. Political parties in India are reluctant to come to a consensus on a legislation regarding the reservation of women (81<sup>st</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill) at the parliamentary level. There could be several reasons why this amendment is under dispute – enhanced representation of women in Parliament would mean challenging the gendered status quo within the political system. Moreover, the pattern of quota systems in India has shown that elite-based strategies of empowerment are less helpful to groups seeking greater recognition than those based on grassroots institutions (Rai 1999).

What is seen is that getting a seat in local government does provide power to the person in the position, even if it is limited. However, getting into the office, as the two country cases showed, does not mean they will be able to participate in local governance. Once in office, as Patnaik (2005) classified, there are two types of participation in local government. One is through formal meetings, and the other is through connecting to constituencies. The two country cases indicate that it is very difficult to exert changes through formal meetings using formal channels laid out in local government, as it is considered to be a well guarded male territory. Some women interviewed in our study, such as Ashalata, Snehalata, Veng Vuchsim, and Van Yorn decided not to fight against this structure, and preferred to be proxies. Furthermore, in the case of Ashalata and Snehalata, confirming to the existing structure is beneficial to them as their families are into politics and it would eventually lead to strengthening of their position. However, there are cases of other women who had decided to challenge the structure.

Binapani, a woman leader, organized women's SHGs rather than pursue and struggle for power in local government system. By organizing women she was able to

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.globalis.gvu.unu.edu> (Source: UN Common Database (IPU))

<sup>16</sup> Commune council members in Cambodia still refer to policies 'dropping from above', that is, if there is no direction/ approval from above, they are not able to make decisions or take action.

circumvent the PRI, and exert influence through the women's groups, which she was earlier not able to do while she was within the system<sup>17</sup>. Such influence was seen when the political parties came to support her during a legal battle in which she was involved. It is interesting to note that Binapani did not come to politics through the support of women's groups. This is not a rare case, as Rai (1999) notes, most women politicians do not come through women's movement. However, through family support, she achieved political experience, which facilitated in reaching out to women's groups. Such U-turn in linking to women's groups and movements, in Binapani's case, proved to strengthen women's groups.

Mahasakti Mahila Mahasangha members and the leader Laxmi Sethi's stance was to keep out of the formal PRI system as they were aware of the limitation and dangers of co-optation. In the process, they find themselves strong enough not to get co-opted into the system. In addition they are able to fight against the formal local government structure. At the micro level they are able to influence the local government for community based activities that has benefited the entire village and enhanced their credibility as a group.

In Cambodia, women face discrimination due to the stereotypic view that they are less competent to join politics as it is a male domain. They are assigned the chair of Women and Children Affairs Focal Point almost automatically because of their sex. This position is a thankless position, with no material benefit but involves a lot of work. As observed in the cases, some women take up the official position they were assigned by the higher authorities. For example, Peng Vuchsim was assigned to be a Women's Association vice chief, and Van Yorn was assigned to be Women and Children Affairs Focal Point, and that is how they started their official career. Their attitude towards participation remains by and large passive, and they are not keen in fighting the CC elections in the future. Even though they had support from political party and their families, to take a position in the local government, that was not enough to make them feel that they are 'participating' in neither of the terms in Patnaik's category. The support from parties is to occupy the position to represent their party, and it is not the party's priority to ensure that they express their opinion. Thus, the woman elected members of the local government are left to fend for themselves on how to carry on in the formal meetings. At the same time, these women elected members did not have any support from other women in the community. As Rai (1999) pointed out, because there is often a gap between women's groups/movement and women politicians, a great effort is needed both from the side of women politicians and the women's groups in order to establish an effectively working support mechanisms for women politicians. Unfortunately, such effort was not made by the above women elected members, and they were left to feel disappointed.

Some other women have been very courageous in making the effort to participate in politics. They feel that there is an obligation to participate once they are in the position, but feel constrained in the formal channel. So, they go back to their constituents – women. The attempt is to reach out to problems faced by women, especially on the issues of domestic violence. As the cases of Heng Mlup and Yous

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<sup>17</sup> Saito and Kato (2008) also noted in their study in Kerala and Karnataka that women leaders encourage other women's participation through organizing SHGs, which is potentially important for further women's networking.



Sner indicate, they found their identity as CC women by helping victims of domestic violence.

In both the study areas of India and Cambodia, there are small women's groups organized around credit known as Self Help Groups (SHGs). However, these groups have very little to do with grooming women for local government representations and leadership positions. According to Rai (1999) this is a great missed opportunity for the cause of women's empowerment and gender equality. However, contrary to the pessimism that Rai expressed regarding this divide, we see in our small number of cases that there is some U-turn loop that connects these women politicians back to support women. Although women leaders do not come with support from women's groups, but get the support of their family, kin, and political parties, that pushes them into elected positions in the local government. Whether they are getting there because of quota or not, but the dependency on male power structure for women local leaders to come to position in our study was evident. Since women representatives are supported by a male structure, they tend to represent this structure automatically in their work environment. However, while in office, some women gain enhanced political awareness and higher motivation for political participation (as in Patnaik's definition). Some other women do not develop political consciousness, and some see it too difficult to make themselves effective in meetings and also to manage both family and politics, and eventually fall out of the loop. There are some women who feel restricted in participating in the formal local government system, and start relating to women and women's groups in the locality – "reaching out to their constituents". Some find it more effective to organize women outside the local government institutions. Some find benefit in remaining in the local government institutions, and use the people's support as political leverage, as can be seen in the case of Yous Sner. The graphic presentation of this cycle is captured in Figure 5.

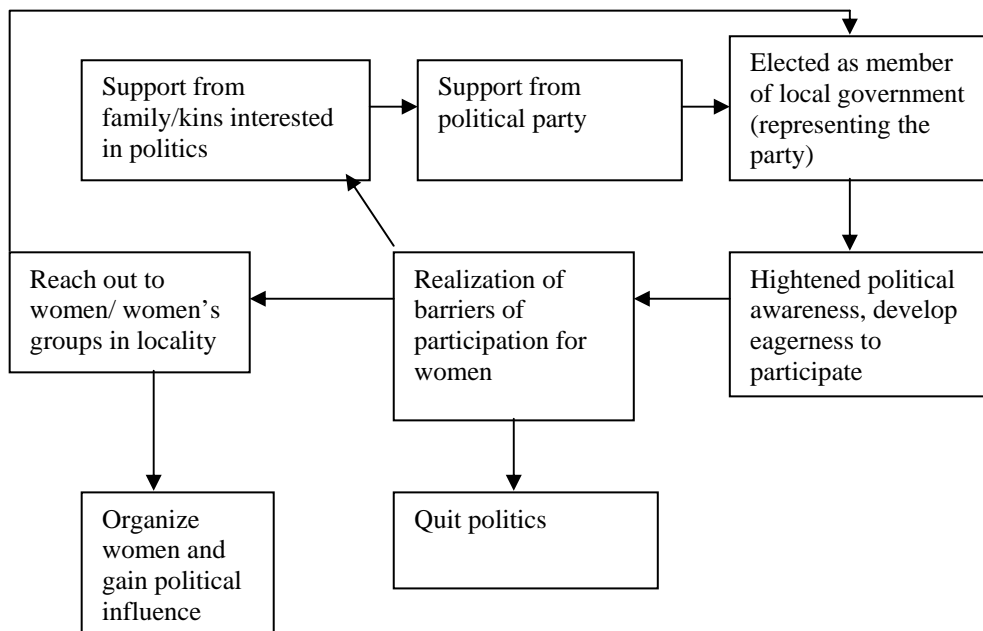
Although the experience by women elected members in local government in the formal structures seems to be negative and not fruitful for the respondents in the two country studies. However, what is encouraging for the future participation of women in these local governments is their U-turn loop in connecting to women's groups in the area. With the knowledge on how politics work in the local government especially for women, the experience in holding a formal position allows them to appreciate the power of women's groups, which they might not have realized when they were not in position. Moreover, the men members will not be able to realize the power of collectives because they do not need to explore alternative route for participation in local government. The conclusion that we reached, in one sense, is very simple: what the women's NGOs and women's movement has been doing for the last decades – organizing women in the communities – is one of the most effective process to strengthen women's participation in local government.

In the study areas of the research at hand, Society for Women Action and Development (SWAD) in Puri District, Orissa, India, have been supporting women elected members of PRIs by giving them training to get experience in functioning in public domain such as in local government bodies. Centre for Action Research and Documentation (CARD) in Khurda District, Orissa, India as well as SWAD are also working to organize women into SHGs and through their active participation, women learn to step into politics. The women leaders interviewed in this study have been

linked and supported by these NGOs by some way or the other. The linkages that NGOs can make to facilitate the U-turn loop cannot be neglected.

In Cambodia, similarly, NGO has provided training to women members. However, since the NGO in Cambodia promoting women’s participation in politics are different from those working in the communities and organizing women, the particular NGO is not serving a role as a catalyst to link women elected members and community women. Although, it should be noted that the women leaders’ experience in working with NGOs might have had some influence in exploring the option of reaching out to their constituency.

**Figure 5: Cycle of political participation among elected member of local government**



Whether this option of reaching out to the women constituents as a form of political participation for elected women members was possible because of the decentralized political structure or not is a question. Is this option possible because this is a local government structure where local women and women’s groups can easily be identified/ recognized not only by women leaders but also by men, as important constituents? If that is the case, decentralization can be considered as a useful tool to foster women leaders by providing them alternative ways of strengthening their participation and influence in politics. Our study is limited to a small number of cases. Therefore, generalization is not possible. The hypothesis that we can suggest would therefore need further discussion and investigation.

## 9. Concluding Remarks

This paper examined how women members in local governments get elected and they perform as elected members in Orissa, India and in Kandal, Cambodia. Women enter the political arena where the landscape is by and large non-negotiable, thereby making space for new comers restrictive (Mander and Asif 2004). Faced with barriers, women members look for alternative avenues of political participation. The cases indicated that there is less probability that elected women will be in a position to change the way local government institutions function. However, women seem to be in a better position to influence local governance. Local governance is a broader concept that encompasses the working of both the formal institutions and informal norms and networks (Shah with Shah 2006)<sup>18</sup>. As Mohan (2008:272) stated, engendering governance is not a goal but a process of governance, which is equitable and ensures that the voices of women are heard in decision-making over the allocation of development resources. We propose that engendering of local governance can occur by having more women elected in local governments, not because it will change the local governments from inside, but because it becomes a breeding ground for stronger women leaders that can influence the local governments from outside the system. In this light, organizing women in **communities/groups** are the best way to bring about political voices to local government institutions, since it will create a readily available **constituency** for women politicians who are seeking an alternative route for participation, thus making both the women leaders and the community women to work towards the same goal.

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<sup>18</sup> Shah with shat (2006:1-2) defined local governance as "a broader concept and is defined as the formulation and execution of collective action at the local level. Thus, it encompasses the direct and indirect roles of formal institutions of local government and government hierarchies, as well as the roles of informal norms, networks, community organizations, and neighbourhood associations in pursuing collective action by defining the framework for citizen-citizen and citizen-state interactions, collective decision making, and delivery of local public services."

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