

Women's Empowerment?

An Analysis of an All Women Panchayat in Andhra Pradesh*

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Today there is increasing recognition that women need to be able to articulate their views, take part in decision-making and shape their lives as well as the World around them. But in actual practice women around the world are in miniscule numbers in decision-making and political power structures at all levels. Particularly in traditional rural societies like India, politics and decision-making is a male 'bastion' and women are generally sidelined into invisibility or tokenism. Given that women are marginal in and to the political process, the incidence of All Women Panchayats are significant and worthy of exploration and study. The All Women Panchayat of Naidugudem in West Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh*(2001-2005) is taken as a case, and is studied in its entirety. The study traces out how it was constituted, its structure and functioning. It examines details about individual members and observes the nature of women's leadership here. To enhance understanding, the study of a general mixed G.P.* headed by a male Sarpanch from the adjacent Satyavolu village is also included.

Section-I presents the various contexts: the status of Panchayati Raj in AP. and women's participation; gender conditions in the location and its geographic, demographic and socio-economic conditions. Section-II focuses on the AWP; Section -III presents a comparative picture of the two G.P.s. before concluding about the scope and nature of women's role in decision-making in formal power structures.

WOMEN IN AP PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

After the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the A.P.P.R. Act, 1994 was passed on May 2004. As on 2004, government of A.P. had transferred functions in respect of 16 out of the recommended 29 subjects; of which Five subjects are transferred with funds; and of these only two subjects are transferred along with functionaries and

funds [drinking water supply and minor irrigation tanks] (Gopinath Reddi, 2003, p.1286). In the post Amendment period income of the P.R.Is from their own sources was only about 10 per cent of their total receipts; specifically for G.P.s it was about 15 per cent. In effect the PRI in AP are deficient in necessary qualities of local self-government.

In 2000, there were about 75,513 women members at G.P. level; 4,776 at Mandal Parishad level and 361 at Zilla Parishad level. Many studies claim that the post amendment phase proved beyond doubt that 'women in P.R. moved from peripheral to leadership roles'. (Manikyamba, P.1989). However, certain negative facets have been observed in the working of P.R. bodies headed by women. The most common observation is 'proxy rule' by the male family members, husbands in particular, (Manikyamba, P., 2003; P.Babu, 2003).

BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH UNIVERSE

West Godavari is one of the rich and fertile coastal districts of AP. The rich resources of the district facilitated a high rate of socio-economic development. Along with material development, the district has also recorded high levels of socio-political consciousness including gender development. W.G.Dt. occupies an important place in its contribution to social reform, freedom movement and women's upliftment. The government recorded 52 women of the W.G.Dt. as participants in the various episodes and activities of the freedom struggle. This is an undeniable evidence of the rising women's consciousness and political participation in this locality. The instances of the women's involvement in the Reform and National movement activities are also indicative of the levels of development in socio-political consciousness of the people of this region. W.G.Dt. is ranked high on Gender Development indicators. A.P.'s total literacy rate

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is 61.6 Per cent (male 71.4 per cent and female 51.5 per cent). W.G.Dt. has the highest literacy in A.P at 73.95 per cent (male 75.43 per cent and female 69.45 per cent).

The Background of the Specific Villages and Region

The literacy rate of Pedapadu Mandal, to which the two Gram Panchayats belong, is the highest for the entire state at 88.63 per cent: 91.48 per cent for males and 84.64 per cent for females. Naidugudem is a revenue village under Pedapadu Mandal formed from the villages of Naidugudem and Khazigudem hamlet. The sex ratio is to the advantage of females (total males 1,117 and females 1,173). The literacy percentages were as follows: Total population 79.3 per cent; males 81.3 per cent and Females 77.3 per cent.

Agriculture, aqua culture and dairying are the main sources of occupation here. The village is totally electrified and its farms are fully irrigated. There are three primary schools and there is cent per cent enrollment of children between five to 15 years. High schools are at the Mandal headquarters, Pedapadu, within a kilometer. There are four Anganwadi centres. A well-organised health sub-centre and veterinary hospital are also located in the village. Drinking water facility is supplied through pipelines to tap connections. Drains and roads are well-maintained; telephones, television, cable network are also plentiful. The village is well connected by road routes to various important towns.

In Naidugudem, Scheduled Castes (S.C.) population forms the overwhelming majority amounting to about more than 50 per cent of the village. The Backward Caste (B.C.) groups comprise about nearly 30 per cent and the rest of the population belongs to the Kamma Caste, which is the economically and politically dominant group here. At the time of the research study (2001-2004) the Kamma caste led Telugu Desam Party (TDP) was in power at the state, district and mandal levels. This community is basically the main peasantry of the state. Its political dominance in the village was natural and inevitable. Its hold over landed property is one of the main contributory factors for its dominance. In Naidugudem village also the pattern of land holdings indicates a near monopoly of land to the Kamma families. For example, Garapati Sambasiva Rao, the M.L.A of Denduluru Constituency belonged to this village. He is the richest Kamma landlord in the region owning reportedly up to 200 acres. Another Kamma Political leader of TDP, Katneni Lakshminarayana Chowdary, is the ZPTC member and this family owns around 70 acres according to the locals. Most of the non-Kamma cultivators we came across owned around three or four acres in contrast to the

Kamma landlords who averagely owned around 15 to 20 acres. Telugu Desam Party was most popular among the people; the congress ranked second. Other parties are hardly known here. The G.P. formed in August 2001 has a total of 10 ward members and the Sarpanch. Excepting for three of them, the rest are TDP supporters.

The Satyavolu G.P. is formed from Satyavolu village proper and Chinna Satyavolu hamlet. Its population is 2,140 persons: 1,089 males and 1,057 females. 891 males and 730 females are literate. Of 942 main workers, 331 are cultivators and 789 are agricultural labourers. None own more than 5-7 acres.

There are two primary schools and one high school. All the children are enrolled. There are two Anganwadi centres here. There is total electrification, a Health sub-centre and a veterinary hospital within the village. Roads, drains and water supply facilities are moderately well organised.

The caste composition of the village is as follows: 179 of 2,146 are SCs, and the rest (91%) belong to B.C.s of TurpuKapu and Koppula Velama castes. Thus, Satyavolu is more or less a homogenous village. The SCs are mainly residents of China Satyavolu hamlet.

ALL WOMEN PANCHAYAT IN NAIDUGUDEM

Formation and Functioning

In 2001 P.R. elections the Sarpanch post in Naidugudem G.P. fell under open category. The village is a part of the Denduluru Assembly constituency. Garapati Sambasiva Rao, a rich kamma landlord hailing from this village of Naidugudem was elected as M.L.A. on T.D.P ticket in the 2000 A.P. assembly elections. He initiated the idea of forming an All Women Panchayat in this village arguing their village would gain attention and recognition. In consultation with other village elite and mainly with K. Lakshminarayana Chowdary, another local TDP leader and a rich Kamma landlord who had been the Sarpanch, during 1985-95 and was the ZPTC Member in 2001, a decision was taken to set-up an AWP. Up to this point it was an exclusively all male affair; the men initiated and decided the matter. Only in the next stage, the informal resolution was conveyed to the women folk of the elite groups. The male elite asked the women to hold a meeting and 'decide unanimously' about who should be on the AWP, and select their Sarpanch.

A 'Gram Sabha' of the village women was convened and in that meeting the list of members to the AWP was decided upon, taking into consideration literacy, levels of education, articulation ability and political, social or public activity experience as qualifying criteria. Due

representation was given to all castes in the village. Some of the members were known to be supporters of Congress. In fact very reasonably they unanimously picked upon the wife of the congress activist as the upa-Sarpanch. The women Gram Sabha also decided that K. Baby Sarojini should be the Sarpanch; she being a B.Sc. graduate, hailing from a rich landlord family and having had political experience as a ward member during 1995-2000. Moreover her family was known to be politically powerful. She is the wife of K. Lakshminarayana Chowdary, the ex-Sarpanch and the present ZPTC member who has good linkages with the MLA. Though they did not voice it, it counted that she belonged to the locally dominant caste of Kamma. They decided to field a woman for the MPTC position also. The Panchayat of 10 women ward members presided over by the woman Sarpanch was inaugurated in August 2001.

The G.P. held its meetings regularly once in a month. Usually the Mandal Development Officer, Mandal Revenue Officer, or village development officer, intimated to the Sarpanch, issues on which the G.P. had to discuss and take decisions. All the members are notified about the G.P. meetings, its timings and agenda, by notices sent through a messenger. Generally there was more or less full attendance in the G.P. meetings. Apart from two members who had migrated, only one member was very irregular. She explained that her household responsibilities do not allow her spare time. She was not interested also. Five of the members have an attendance record of 80 per cent and above, and three of the others attended 50 to 70 per cent of the meetings. Of course, the Sarpanch attended all the meetings.

At the meetings, every body was seated equally without any discrimination. Everyone was free to discuss on any matter they felt interested in. The Sarpanch to her credit always sought to discuss all the matters in the G.P. and went by team decisions. Decisions were taken by consensus. The interesting point is that along with the Sarpanch and Panchayat members, their male relatives also attended and participated in the discussions; but it did not appear that they were imposing male authority. Rather their role seemed to be facilitating the process of decision-making. Other local citizens (mainly men) also came to the meetings and some of the men even offered their views and ideas. Sometimes, the M.L.A. also attended the G.P. meetings in his official capacity. Whenever there was a problem or a deadlock, the men resolved it and took the decision. Some women members did not feel fully free in their presence. Particularly it appeared that the women of the Kamma families were more subdued whereas the women representing BCs and SCs appeared to be more articulate and sought

information freely from the males present. It could also be due to the more pressing needs of the wards the latter represented

From 2001 to March 2004, the Naidugudem G.P. budget expenditure was Rs. 41,72,000/- with which it has undertaken a number of works as per the schemes and projects available to it. These fall under food for work programme, Jawahar Gramina Sadak Yojana, State Gramina Rojgari Yojana, Neeru-Meeru (programme for conserving water), Janmabhoomi Programmes, works under Panchayat funds, women welfare funds, 11th Finance Commission grants and others. The works taken-up pertain to construction of CC roads; community hall, Mahila Pranganam and Panchayati office building, repairs, leveling, gravelling and cementing interior roads, construction and repairs of drains, silting, fencing and embanking water tanks and other miscellaneous items. The lion's share was spent on construction of roads: Rs. 24,64,000; followed by works related to water supply and tanks: Rs. 6,25,000 and drainage: Rs. 1,74,000. Rs. 1,14,000 was spent on miscellaneous items.

The Panchayat members and Sarpanch have informed that they have given top priority to issues related to drinking water. They had heard of drinking water problems in other neighboring villages and so they took all the steps necessary for proper supply of drinking water. They have fenced off their tanks, organised watch and ward to keep off cattle from the drinking water tanks. They proudly claim that now they are supplying drinking water to neighboring villagers for a fee and thus increasing the G.P. revenues. They have also given a lot of importance to construction, and maintenance of roadways. Not only the bus route roads, but even the interior roads in their hamlets are of CC. Another proud achievement was the award of the 'Nirmal Puraskar' for the year 2003-04 for having successfully implemented the private lavatory scheme for every house. In addition they carried on the routine works like repairs and maintenance of existing facilities. During the AWP period they also built the Mahila Pranganam, the community hall and the panchayat office building. Though there were no specifically women oriented programmes, schemes covering drinking water and private lavatories are definitely most essential for women than for the rest.

PROFILE AND PERFORMANCE OF MEMBERS

Two of the ward members had migrated; yet information about them was gathered from others. But on items like members' awareness the two are listed as not available (NA). [See Tables at the end] Eight were Hindus; and three were Christians. There were three S.C. and three B.C.

members. The remaining four and the Sarpanch were from Kamma community, the dominant caste of the area. The Kammas made-up nearly 50 per cent of the Panchayat strength though they were approximately only 20 per cent of population. While the SCs were more than 50 per cent in the population, their representation was limited to three members only. Eight of the 10 members and the Sarpanch were middle aged. There were no illiterates though only two had passed 10th class. The Sarpanch was a science graduate. As per occupation, three were agriculture labourers, two cultivators and one an Anganwadi helper. The Sarpanch and four others were housewives. Regarding personal income, Sarpanch and four others reported nil income; two were in low income group, and two in middle income group.

Regarding the family background of the members, the Sarpanch and another six ward members were from cultivators' families and three were from agriculture labourer families. One person's husband was an auto-driver. Families of six members were in middle-income group. Families of Sarpanch and Upa-Sarpanch and another member (three) are from higher income group. The remaining two were in lower income group. Eight members had a medium family size (Five – Eight) and none fell under the large family size category.

Excepting in case of Sarpanch and Upa-Sarpanch, the families of the nine ward members had no political background. The Sarpanch had been a ward member in the previous G.P. For the others, it was a first experience. Five had absolutely no public activity experience and five were members of DWCRAs. Seven members were found to have an average understanding of the G.P. matters. The Sarpanch was well aware about her and the G.P.'s role and responsibilities. Another elderly member also was rated as having a good level of awareness not only about the G.P. but also about socio – political issues. All the nine were positively sure that women's political participation is a good thing. Six members and the Sarpanch reported that G.P. membership had improved their confidence. The Sarpanch and the elderly Smt. Potturi Varalakshmi believe that it had improved their public role and image. The Sarpanch and three other members reported visiting local and mandal level officers whenever needed.

None of the ten members have ever participated in any other political activity. The Sarpanch has associated herself with such political programmes very often. All the eight members and the Sarpanch firmly believed that they have the support from all the citizens. They also emphasized that support from the male members of the family or the bureaucracy, or their parties or from the villagers has never been a problem. Four of the members

and the Sarpanch reported that they have neither problems nor any obstacles in the discharge of duties. Four of them believed their functional illiteracy (they can only sign) and ignorance are the main hurdles in their work process. Two of them also mentioned problems of mobility and security. Only one woman felt that household responsibility was an obstacle.

Generally the individual ward members give a patient hearing to their co-residents whenever there were minor local problems. In case of roadside bushy growths or simple blocking of drains, voluntary service was organised under the ward representative's initiative and the problems were solved. Where there were more serious issues, the ward members represented the matter to the Sarpanch. The Sarpanch would discuss with the panchayat members, the local male elite and the officials to find the solution. The zeal of the Sarpanch to get things done is one reason why other ward members are also influenced and find following-up complaints satisfying. There is a psychological element of pride to prove that an AWP can perform. As new entrants into public roles, with a positive attitude among the village elite and zeal of the Sarpanch most of them have some enthusiasm in performing their roles. The assumed limitation like lack of functional literacy is not a real obstacle to women's active public participation. For example the ward member Smt. Potturi Varalakshmi is 60 years old and can only sign her name, but she is a very articulate and active leader. Of course, not all the members are able to take on their responsibilities fully. Most of them feel their lack of social awareness or earlier experiences in public activity and the new non-customary behaviours, and unfamiliar works inhibit them from taking-up more active roles.

GROUP DYNAMICS

The inter-personal relationship between the members has been very warm and cordial, but obviously intra-caste relations are easier due to ties of marriage or blood relationship. This was particularly pronounced amongst the three Kamma ward members, Upa-Sarpanch and Sarpanch. Note that in villages residence is invariably patterned on caste. So, there is a convergence of the same caste members within the immediate neighborhood; while this feature facilitates daily interaction among themselves, this also keeps people of other caste groups apart at a distance and minimizes scope for routine interaction. One of the kamma members resides near about the residential area of the S.C. and is more familiar with them on a daily basis. Similarly one of the S.C. members resides near the Other Castes and has regular

interaction with them. The other S.C. and B.C. women reside at a distance, nearer to the outskirts. They have no occasion to mingle with others frequently and so have lesser inter-relations with others. Outwardly there is no discrimination against any one in the G.P. But clearly the Kamma members have a dominant role. The rest passively accept it. Class is another relevant factor. All the Kamma members are from wealthier land holding families compared to the other members, who fall under middle and poorer categories. Despite the clear caste and class overlap, still, the members repeatedly specified that they always work unitedly as a team under the educated and able leadership of the Sarpanch. Apparently the members are maintaining good inter-relationships and the G.P. is working smoothly. At the same time the domination of the upper caste cum upper class sections is also very clear.

The only whisper of a mild expression of dissatisfaction was by the S.C. member representing the hamlet. One of the B.C. members, who due to disinterest and burden of household responsibilities has been very irregular, also reported feeling alienated from the G.P. These were some complaints by some citizens belonging to Khazigudem hamlet, because fewer development works were implemented in this place, which is two kilometres apart from the village. Most of the development programmes did not extend to the hamlet. There are two ward members from this hamlet. Both are from B.C. and they supported congress party. One had migrated, and the other representative has expressed her unhappiness about the negligence of their locality.

ROLE OF THE SARPANCH

The role of the Sarpanch deserves special mention and attention. In the new G.P.s under the 73rd amendment the Sarpanch is indeed the pivot of the system. Smt. Baby Sarojini, the Sarpanch of the all women G.P. belongs to one of the richer Kamma families of this village. Naidugudem is native place of both, her parents and in laws. Smt. Baby Sarojini was born on April 14, 1952. She is a B.Sc. graduated from St. Theresa's college of Eluru. She was married to K. Lakshminarayana Chowdary on June 12, 1971. Her personal property includes 33 acres of land in the village while their family owns 70 acres. All her three children are well educated, and well settled. The youngest son, an engineer, is yet to be married. At present the members of the family are she, her husband, their eldest son, his wife and two children and the younger son. Her daughter-in-law manages and supervises the household work.

Sarojini's mother had served as the president of the

Village Mahila mandal; her father was a contractor. She married into another rich Kamma family in the village. Her husband Lakshmi Narayana Chowdary entered into politics having joined TDP when it was founded in 1983. He served as the Sarpanch of the village for about a decade from 1984 to 1994. In the 2001 local elections, he became the ZPTC member. He has earned a good name as local political leader. He also maintains good relationship with the local M.L.A., Garapati Sambasiva Rao of Denduluru constituency who is a native of the same village and the richest kamma landlord of their area. This family political background helped Smt. Baby Sarojini in her role as Sarpanch.

Sarojini started her political life by becoming a ward member on unanimous decision in 1994 at the age of 43, but did not play any active role at all. She was even unaware of her rights and duties and did not participate in G.P. meetings. It was only after becoming the Sarpanch in 2001 that she was propelled into a highly active role. Her selection to the position of Sarpanch was definitely determined by her husband's political clout; though due recognition was also given to her relatively higher educational qualification as B.Sc. graduate, and her previous experience as ward member.

Since becoming the Sarpanch, Smt Baby Sarojini has taken on her responsibility seriously. Though her political awareness is not high, her sociable nature and good interpersonal relationships with the other members, her confident approach regarding officials and her belief that their women panchayat can do whatever they want to efficiently, are positive qualities. She is not a passive personality. She maintains good rapport with all the members. She keeps them posted about G.P., Gram Sabha and other meetings. She routinely passes on official information to them and is easily accessible. She readily discusses all their ward problems, offers guidance and sincerely tries to find solutions. Under her, the G.P. decisions have always been by discussion and consensus. Here of course, the role of the male elite at the G.P. meetings should not be forgotten. All the ward members have reported that the Sarpanch is a good leader and that their team spirit is high. She has the full cooperation of all her members. Women according to Smt. Baby Sarojini have tolerance and patience, which are essential to be successful politically; but she herself is not considering continuing her political role in future, mainly because she is not interested. After four years of working (from 2001-2004) now the members are confident that if they are led by Smt. Baby Sarojini they can perform their roles efficiently even without the guidance of their men folk and male political elite.

THE IMPACT

The AWP is neither a high profile case nor a low-key affair. None of them is an illiterate and no one is rated high on awareness and social consciousness. None of them had specific knowledge about the rights, duties and functioning of the G.P. Neither the government nor their parties have given them any training or orientation in G.P. matters. Naturally, their husbands emerged as their main advisers and also took on certain functions like interacting with male officials at higher levels. Some of the more active women members also visited offices and interacted with officials. The Sarpanch, Upa-Sarpanch, Smt. Varalakshmi, (the elderly person) and another member usually were active in these matters also. Being an All Women team, they mix freely with one another. Their meeting times are also convenient to their domestic duties and security concerns.

The women members say that their new duties are not affecting their domestic life. As they receive the notice of their meeting before hand they adjust their domestic work to suit the timings. None of them reported any objections from family members to their working as G.P. members. One woman explained that her irregularity was due to household responsibilities; The member who is working as an Anganwadi ayah, a S.C. women member who is an agricultural labourer, and another ward member from the hamlet who is a marginal farmer - these four find it difficult to attend the panchayat meetings regularly due to their occupation. None of the members reported any change in their status in the family but they felt their interaction with outsiders and officials has increased. They also feel that the experience of working in the G.P. has improved their knowledge, increased their social awareness, enhanced their ability to perform certain tasks and bettered their interpersonal relations with others. They also specify that the very regular act of going to the G.P. office in their official position has improved their image and self-confidence. The typical house-wives of the upper caste families are particularly feeling a change in themselves. A new sense of identity and confidence is found among the more active members.

A cross-section of 25 villagers were interviewed on their perceptions about AWP. Almost every one was proudly appreciative of the successful AWP. The male respondents did not express any hostility or make light of the AWP. People specifically recognized, there had been more development during the AWP term than in the earlier 1995-2000 period. The earlier panchayat was also a unanimously constituted body headed by a B.C. TDP supporter, as the Sarpanch. The Upa-Sarpanch of the earlier G.P. expressed his wholehearted appreciation

of the AWP's working. He confessed it was implementing more development programmes than what they had done during 1995-2000, in his own term. In the village, the majority supported the Telugu Desam Party and the kmmas have remained the dominant caste. These factors have helped the AWP function smoothly without opposition or factionalism.

Though the role of the husband of the Sarpanch and the M.L.A and other male relatives of some of the members of the AWP was an open affair, none of the villagers commented negatively on it. Perhaps, the husband of the Sarpanch as Z.P.T.C member and the M.L.A as representing the village are accepted as part of the local level democratic decision making process. The husband of the Sarpanch being presently the Z.P.T.C member, as a member of the P.R. institutions will also get to know about the issues on the G.P. agenda. In consultation with the M.L.A., decisions were made sometimes after contacting a few other political elite. Then the Sarpanch intimated to her G.P. members to decide upon the method of implementation. Since usually the male political elite- the M.L.A., the Z.P.T.C. member, etc., were present at the G.P. meetings, they were able to influence the decision-making process, without being aggressive. To all outward appearances, the women members were not obstructed in their functioning either in the G.P. or in the household. In fact their working was much facilitated and encouraged by their family men folk and other political activists.

III

THE COMPARISON

Here the details of the individual members of the two G.Ps. (See table-2) their family backgrounds (see table - 3) and performance (see table-4) are discussed in comparison (Tables are given at the end).

Personal Background

Age influences women's political participation. Younger women face many obstacles. Majority of women participants belong to later ages. Among Naidugudem G.P. members there was only one each falling under the youth and old age categories while the rest were middle aged. In Satyavolu mixed Panchayat, while three men were recorded under younger category, four of the eight men and all the three women were in their middle ages; only one belonged to older age group.

Religion has a significant role in both politics and

gender issues. Religion influences political culture and socialisation regarding women's political roles. All the members and the Sarpanch of Satyavolu G.P. were Hindus; while in the Naidugudem G.P., the Sarpanch and seven members were Hindus and three other members were Christians. Caste is very crucial in rural Indian politics. Caste also determines women's political participation. All the ten members and Sarpanch of Satyavolu G.P. belonged to B.C. communities. With regard to Naidugudem G.P., three members were from Scheduled Caste, three from B.C.s and the Sarpanch and four other members belonged to the Kamma Caste (a forward peasant caste category). Satyavolu G.P. is homogenous in terms of religion and caste. But the sense of team spirit and identity was in a better state in Naidugudem All Women G.P.

There is a close relationship between literacy and political awareness. Education helps in developing self-confidence and personal control. There were no illiterates in both the villages. There were four graduates (all men) in the mixed Satyavolu G.P. while only the Sarpanch of the AWP was a graduate. In both villages a majority were functionally literate. Two members of the women Panchayat and one member of the mixed panchayat reported passing 10th Class. As explained in the background section literacy levels are very high for males and females in W.G.Dt.

In Naidugudem G.P., the Sarpanch and four members were non-workers (house wives); three were agricultural labourers, two were cultivators and one was in honorary service. In Satyavolu mixed G.P., five were agricultural labourers; the sarpanch and four others were cultivators and one member was self employed. On this factor, there is clear difference between the AWP and mixed Panchayat. Nearly 50 per cent of the former are housewives and non-workers. This indicates a dependency status of the respondents. In the Satyavolu G.P. every member is a working person. The information on personal income also strengthens the fact of women's dependency status. Access to money is essential to participate in politics. Women who are non-workers and traditionally without ownership of property usually cannot play an independent role in politics, because they have no control over economic resources. Five members of Naidugudem G.P. were without personal income; while every member of Satyavolu reported having some level of personal income. The fact, that the majority of the AWP were non-workers without any personal income raises questions about their independent political roles.

Family Background

Family background in terms of property, income and occupation indicates the class position, which is significant in understanding power or powerlessness. In Indian villages large land holders and cultivators with higher income wield political power. It is interesting that seven of the AWP members reported cultivation as the main occupation of their families and three of them fell under higher income group. Among the Satyavolu G.P. members, five reported cultivation as the main occupation but only one person, the Sarpanch qualified to the higher income group. That is, there were more members from richer families in the AWP.

Regarding the size and the type of family, nine of the AWP members reported belonging to medium-size extended family; while of the mixed panchayat a higher number of members, (seven) came from small nuclear type families. It is suggested that extended families with additional adult female relatives, could possibly provide support and help in house hold work reducing domestic responsibilities of the women members. Nine of the AWP and eight of the mixed panchayat reported nil family political background. It is noted that both the sarpanches came from families with political background.

Political experience and present performance

Political socialisation, the imbuing of the given political culture and thus improving political ability, rests on the family background and personal political exposure. This influences one's way of working. Information was also gathered about members' experience in and awareness about political and public activity. Only the sarpanches of both the villages have had earlier experience in panchayat activity. Five of the women panchayat and six of the mixed panchayat reported nil earlier experiences. DWCRA was cited as experience in public activity by five of the women panchayat. The significance of DWCRA in exposing women to public roles is acknowledged.

Attendance to Gram-Panchayat meetings is seen as the primary indicator of the members functioning and performance. It was found that the Sarpanch and four members of the AWP attended above 70 per cent of the meetings; three members' attendance fell in between 50 to 70 per cent, two of the rest are migrants and one member was very irregular. The attendance in Satyavolu mixed Gram-Panchayat is as follows: the Sarpanch and only one other member had an attendance above 70 per cent; attendance of three members' fell in between 50-70

per cent and six members including the three women representatives hardly attended the meetings.

The awareness levels of respondents was tested and rated above average, average and below average on a checklist prepared by the scholar. In Naidugudem AWP, the Sarpanch and another member were rated as having above average level of awareness; seven as having an average level of awareness and nobody fell under below average (two migrants are not included). Whereas in the Satyavolu mixed Panchayat the Sarpanch and another male member were rated as above average; four as average and the remaining five (inclusive of the three women) fell under the category of below average level of awareness.

Political participation means involvement in political activities like attending party meetings, participation in rallies and other party programmes, campaigning, supporting pressure groups, addressing meetings, being an office bearer and contesting elections, etc. Here we considered the members' participation in public activities other than in the G.P. When the respondents of the two village panchayats were asked about such participation other than their roles in the panchayat, it was found that all the members of the AWP, Naidugudem had no other activities to report. In the Satyavolu mixed panchayat, four members (including the three women) had nothing to report while five of them reported a low level of involvement in other political activities and one member reported participation in additional political programmes. The Sarpanches of both the panchayats are rated as high in terms of participation in such political activities.

Politicalisation is inferred also from the member's political aspirations. Those who show an interest in taking active role in politics in future as by wishing to contest in future elections are assessed as being actively interested. Those without such an interest are classified as not having interest. On the questions about their future political role none of them expressed any wish to take part in elections at any level. One each from both the G.P.s specifically mentioned that they had no interest and would never again take-up political or governmental roles. Surprisingly the rest of them, the Sarpanch and seven members of Naidugudem and the Sarpanch and nine members of Satyavolu stated that though they would not like to take part in elections, if they are chosen unanimously they are willing to accept posts and positions. The Sarpanches who appeared to be more politicalised have also responded likewise. Hence, we added a category 'Passive interest' in between active interest and apathetic disinterest. The two migrants of Naidugudem are not recorded here.

Entry into official positions of governance is expected to bring about a change in one's status. It is particularly assumed to empower the women. In our enquiry six of the members of Naidugudem AWP reported an improvement in their self-confidence, while four members and the Sarpanch of the mixed panchayat said so. The Sarpanch and another member of Naidugudem AWP reported an improvement in their public roles; none of the Satyavolu G.P. felt any such change. While six (the three women included) of the mixed Satyavolu G.P. maintained that the G.P. membership has brought no change, only one member of Naidugudem says so. Thus the simple fact of being members in local governing bodies seems to have positive impact on women's personality, more than for men.

The following presents the researcher's evaluation of the members' performance based on a check-list of items. They were ranked into three grades: Average, above average and below average. In the AWP of Naidugudem, three of the members including the two migrants were rated as below average; while the figures for the same in Satyavolu is six (includes all the three women members). Six of the Naidugudem AWP members and four of the Satyavolu mixed panchayat were rated as having an average performance. In the above average grade we have the Sarpanch and another member of the AWP, while only the Sarpanch of Satyavolu mixed Panchayat qualified to it.

Financial resources constitute the most important factor determining the G.P.s' functioning and efficiency. A perusal of the budget and expenditure statements of the two G.P.s (See Table-5) puts the AWP clearly ahead with its three years total expenditure on development and maintenance works coming to around Rs. 42 lakhs as against the mere Rs. 7 lakh recorded by Satyavolu G.P. Satyavolu G.P. is in a sorry state of affairs regarding finances. The presence of the local M.L.A. at Naidugudem and his persuasive powers to tap necessary grants and resources to his native village is the actual reason behind the AWP securing its grants promptly. The failure of Satyavolu G.P. to get its due share of grants is no doubt glaring and with a meager amount at Rs. 7 lakh over three years period not much of development works can be expected to be achieved.

This comparison throws light on issues on which the AWP and the mixed panchayat are similar and dissimilar and the contexts in which they are functioning. On criteria of age, education, political activity, personal income, autonomy/dependent status members of the AWP are at a disadvantage. Paradoxically in terms of attendance, awareness, working, team spirit, role satisfaction, self-development and overall performance The AWP of Naidugudem scores better.

CONCLUSION

The study of the AWP, comparison with the mixed panchayat and an examination of the contexts presents us the following picture. The dominant caste cum class elite of Naidugudem have conceived and worked out the AWP, strategically maintaining their hold over local governance and affairs. This is a reflection of the political reality in our rural society. 'Patriarchy'-male domination also continues. Only within it women were allowed some space and scope. Compared to the mixed G.P., AWP scored better as these women were first timers, heady with the ongoing buzz of women empowerment and the concomitant zeal it unleashed and because of the personal interest of the local M.L.A. in getting the due grants to the G.P.

Be it as a benign gesture or a shrewd political strategy, the AWP formation, and the certain amount of autonomy in its working are to be noted and commended for the impact it has on the women functioning within it; and as a role model. These women were basically from the elite sections. Beyond certain limits there was no transformation of male-female relations, nor questioning of the male involvement or interference in final decision-making authority. Increasing number of women and number of positions within PRI for women by itself cannot transform gender relations nor eliminate patriarchy. But one must also note that the AWP does not convey an image of mere tokenism or passivity. It sends across the message that presence and position in decision making structures facilitates the activation of women's empowerment by unfolding scope for 'practice in exercise of power', personality development, leadership styles, and 'gendered perceptions of priorities.'

NOTES

- * Hence forth W.G. Dist is used for West Godavari District, A.P. is used for Andhra Pradesh, G.P. is used for Gram Panchayat, PRI for Panchayati Raj Institutions, and AWP for All Women Panchayat.

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Table - 1
A.P and W.G.Dt. A Comparison of Gender Development 2001

Region	Sex ratio2001	Literacy rate		
		Total	Male	Female
A.P	978	61.6	71.4	51.5
W.G.Dt.	994	73.95	75.43	69.45

Source: From Census 2001

Table - 2
Distribution of respondents* by back ground characteristics

Characteristics	Item	Naidugudem	Satyavolu
Age	Young	1	3
	Middle aged	8+1	7
	Old	1	+1
Religion	Hindus	7+1	10+1
	Christian	3	Nil
Caste	SC	3	Nil
	BC	3	10+1
	OC	4+1	Nil
Education	Illiterate	Nil	Nil
	Literate	8	6
	10 th class	2	+1
	Graduation	+1	4
Occupation	Housewife(non workers)	4+1	Nil
	Agriculture laborer	3	5
	Cultivator	2	4+1
	Honorary service	1	Nil
	Self employment	Nil	1
Income@	Higher income group	Nil	+1
	Middle income group	2	5
	Lower income group	2	5
	No income	4+1	Nil

* Respondents: The Sarpanches and the members of Naidugudem and Satyavolu G.P.s.

@ Indicates the 2 migrants are excluded

+1 indicates reference to Sarpanch

Table - 3
Respondents by Family Background

Family background	Characteristics	Naidugudem	Satyavolu
Occupation	1	2	3
	Agricultural labourer	3	5
	Cultivator	6+1	4+1
	Self employment	1 [@]	1*
Income	High income group	2+1	+1
	Middle income group	6	5
	Lower income group	2	5
Size of family	Small	2	5
	Medium	8+1	4+1
	large	Nil	1*
Type of Family	Nuclear family	2	6+1
	Extended family	8+1	3
	Joint family	Nil	1
Political back ground of family	Family with political background	1+1	2+1
	Family with no political background	9	8

+1 indicates reference to Sarpanch

@ -Auto driver

Shopkeeper

Table - 4
Respondents by political experience and performance

Item		Naidugudem	Satyavolu
1 Earlier Experience in Politics And Public Activity		2	3
	DWCRA	5	2
	G.P.	+1	+1
	Other public organization	Nil	2
	No Experience	5	6
G.P. attendance	Below 50%	3	6
	50-70%	3	3
	70% above	4+1	1+1
Awareness levels about G.P. [@]	Above average	1+1	1+1
	Average	7	4
	Below average	Nil	5
Other political activities	None	10	4
	Low	Nil	5
	Middle	Nil	1
	High	+1	+1
Interest in future political participation [@]	Active interest	Nil	Nil
	Passive interest	7+1	9+1
	No interest	1	1
Impact on personality [@]	Improved public role	1+1	Nil
	Improved confidence	6	4+1
	No change	1	6
Researcher's Assessment of member's performance	Above average	1+1	+1
	Average	6	4
	Below average	3	6

+1 indicates reference to Sarpanch @ Excludes the two migrants

Table - 5
Expenditure pattern of Naidugudem and Satyavolu
G.P. (2001-2004)

Item 1.	Naidugudem 2.	Satyavolu 3.
1.construction and repair of roads	24,64,000	3,16,747
2.construction, and maintenance of water works	6,25,000	2,42,013
3.Construction and maintenance of drains	1,74,000	61,328
4.Buildings and construction	7,95,00	—
5. Others	1,14,000	—
6. Total	41,72,000	6,20,088

Sources: Records of Naidugudem and Satyavolu G.P. office -2004