FINDING POWER: GENDER AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ~~RURAL~~ RAJASTHAN, INDIA

This thesis is submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
London School of Economics and Political Science
University of London

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2005

UMI Number: U210695

UMI

Dissertation Publishing

ProQuest

THESES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the effects of women's political participation on gender dynamics in the context of the local community. A broad definition of politics is used, which has allowed the research to investigate and analyse the effects of participation in both NGO-initiated women's groups and *Panchayati Raj* institutions (village/local level councils). The central discussion, therefore, focuses on the extent to which these different types of participation have been or can be empowering for women as individuals and as a group. In relation to this, different conceptualisations of power and the meanings and uses of empowerment and participation are explored.

Research data was collected in five villages, a peri-urban area and one town in Bikaner District, Rajasthan, India. Ethnographic data was collected which the researcher uses to stress the importance of disaggregating women not only along the lines of caste, class, religion and so forth but also according to generation and familial position, when considering their changing roles and status in society.

While acknowledging that certain aspects of political participation can have empowering effects the thesis argues that political participation is not necessarily empowering for women and in some cases may have the reverse effect. The dangers of instrumentalist arguments used to encourage and initiate women's political participation are highlighted. It is argued that 'empowering' women to participate is not enough to increase their status, quality of life or life choices if disempowering processes and structures within institutions are not also challenged and overcome.

The thesis makes the case that family and community members generally support increases in women's political participation so long as it is only certain women who participate in a certain manner. It also argues for the greater inclusion of men into projects aiming to challenge detrimental gender norms.

CONTENTS

Chapter Eight: Conclusion
Women As Champions: Women As Victims – Finding Power: Empowerment and Participation

Glossary
of *Hindi* and *Marwari* Terms

bai	literally meaning sister, but used after names to show respect and familiarity (as opposed to *ji* which is more formal)
bhai	literally meaning brother, but used after names to show familiarity and friendship
bajra	pearl millet
benani or *bo*	daughter-in-law
choudhary	treasurer
chula	cooking stove – usually referring to one made of mud
dai	village midwife
devi	literally meaning goddess used after names to show respect
devar	husband's younger brother
dhani	dispersed hamlet/settlement (often used to refer to a shelter or home situated in fields outside of the main village area)
diggi	A water tank or reservoir
ghunghat	veil: any piece of cloth used to cover the face
gram panchayat	village council
gram sabha	*panchayat* body made up of all the electorate in a village
himmati	bold - confident
izzat	family and personal honour and respect
jhet	husband's elder brother
jhetani	husband's elder brother's wife
ji	marker of respect used after names
kuwan	well (for water)
jhopanri	round wood and mud house
mahila sangathan	women's organisation
mooklava	when a girl goes to live with her husband for the first time

malik	boss
nahar	canal
namaste	polite greeting
nulli	open drainage channel
patwari	village revenue officer
pihar	a married person's natal family and place
pradhan	head person
randa	literally meaning widow, but is used as a term of abuse, implying sexual promiscuity or prostitution
roti	unleavened bread usually made from wheat or millet
sahb	sir (indicating respect or authority)
samiti panchayat	sub-district level council
Sarpanch	chairperson of a *gram panchayat*
sas	mother-in-law
sasur	father-in-law
sasural	a married person's conjugal family and place
sevak	secretary
tehsil	administrative unit within a district
tehsil dar	most senior bureaucrat at *tehsil* level
up-sarpanch	deputy chairperson of a *gram panchayat*
ward panch	member of a *gram panchayat*
zilla parishad	district level council

LOCATION OF RAJASTHAN
IN INDIA

JAMMU & KASHMIR

CHINA

PAKISTAN

UTTARANCHAL

DELHI

NEPAL

BHUTAN

RAJASTHAN
Jaipur

Patna

JHARKHAND

CHHATTISGARH

Calcutta

Mumbai
(Bombay)

ARABIAN SEA

BAY OF BENGAL

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Map not to Scale
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RAJASTHAN
District Map

N

PAKISTAN

PUNJAB

HARYANA

Ganganagar Hanumangarh

Churu

Bikaner

Jhunjhunu

Sikar

UTTAR PRADESH

Nagaur

Alwar

Bharatpur

Jaipur

Dausa

Jaiselmer

Jodhpur

Dhaulpur

Ajmer

Tonk

Karauli

Sawai Madhopur

Barmer

Pali

Bhilwara

Bundi

Rajsamand

Kota

Baran

Jalor

Sirohi

Udaipur

Chittaurgarh

Jhalawar

MADHYA PRADESH

Dungarpur

GUJARAT

Banswara

Map not to Scale

⊙ State Capital
— State Boundary

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores women's local level political participation in Bikaner district, Northwest Rajasthan, India. It investigates the effects of women's political participation on gender relations in the context of the local community.[1] A broad definition of politics is used and women's political participation in both governmental institutions and those located in civil society is considered. As such the research is concerned with women's participation in *Panchayati Raj* institutions (essentially local councils) and NGO initiated, village level, *mahila sangathans* (women's organisations).

The thesis discusses how women's political participation influences changing perceptions of gender roles and relations. It assesses the extent to which women's inclusion in political institutions and local level organisations has the potential to be empowering for women. It identifies aspects of women's political participation which are beneficial and aspects which limit women's empowerment. It asks if empowerment in one site of struggle necessarily leads to empowerment in another.

The discussion of these issues challenges the often-made assumption that political participation is necessarily and of itself empowering for women as a group or as individuals. I argue that both empowerment and participation are overused and misused terms in development discourses. The thesis critically examines both the usage of the terms participation and empowerment and the practice of participation.

I explore the motivations of those encouraging and arguing for the participation of poor, rural women in politics, illustrating how these motivations are frequently contrary to those of the women who participate. The thesis makes the case that many of the arguments presented for encouraging women's participation in politics are based on false dichotomies and artificial constructions of women.

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[1] Community is an often used but rarely defined term. I draw on Agarwal's (1994: 73) definition and see a community as being based on residency, e.g. the village community, or on social grouping, e.g. a religious or caste community. However, I accept that 'a person can be a member of several communities simultaneously, for instance, of a caste or religious grouping within a village (or spreading across several villages) as well as of the larger community containing several castes or religious groupings' (ibid.). In using this term I do not wish to imply that such communities are homogeneous, but instead recognise them to be heterogeneous in terms of power, resources and interests.

I argue that empowering women, or other marginalised groups, to participate is not enough to either sustain the participation itself or to increase their status, quality of life or life choices if disempowering processes and structures within political institutions are not also challenged as either a pre-requisite to, or simultaneously, with such participation.

I demonstrate how gender dynamics not only operate alongside other dominant social stratifiers, such as caste and class, to determine a woman's status, but generation, position in the family and place of residence play an equally important role in the Rajasthani context. As such, I argue that common interests or equality of participation cannot be assumed even among women from similar caste and class positions.

The thesis considers the role of men in challenging detrimental gender norms and argues that women alone should not be held responsible for such a change.

Power dynamics are at the heart of all areas of analysis within this study. It examines how power is negotiated at local levels by investigating family relationships, social dynamics at village level and the relationships between village communities and non-governmental organisation. It also considers how national and global discourses impact upon these local relationships. My analysis of the empirical data in this thesis demonstrates that using only one conception of power is limiting, as it cannot capture all the different ways in which power operates.

The research from the outset has been concerned to focus on women's political agency in order to assert poor rural Indian women's position as actors, with resources for power. This presentation of 'Third World Women' and particularly poor rural women helps to dispel the myth of them being a powerless 'other', which has provided 'a powerful means to perpetuate colonialist relations between North and South' (Udayagiri, 1995: 164). However, at the same time I aim to present a realistic picture of groups of women who have been routinely suppressed by the forces of patriarchy, caste, class and global economic and social systems rather than the romanticised image which is often the counterpoint to that of the powerless 'other'.

1.1 Origins Of The Research

The idea for the research came about when I was visiting Northwest India in 1994. During this time a series of protest activities were taking place. It struck me that most of those protesting on the streets, 'manning' roadblocks and so forth were women. This contrasted strongly with images of domestic subservience presented in much of the literature on South Asia and that which I saw myself in different North Indian households. These two strong, and perhaps contradictory images, made me ask questions not only about women's role in protest politics but how identities change across different spaces: how and why is forceful agitation by women acceptable in public spaces while subservience and diffidence are demanded in the private sphere? At the same time I began to question the way in which women's involvement in community organising and informal politics was being espoused as a straightforward route to women's empowerment. Much of the gender and development literature was also focusing on women's role in politics and indeed political participation had become a key indicator in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Gender Equality Measure (GEM) (UNDP, 1995). Participation was being seen more and more as the key route to empowerment for marginalised people. Nevertheless, other voices could be heard which talked about women's 'triple burden' of reproductive work, productive work and community organising activities (Kabeer, 1994; Moser, 1993). I wanted to investigate when and how grassroots political participation on the part of poor women is empowering and when it is simply another burden on their time, which offers little improvement in their own lives.

Four years later I visited North India again to identify possible sites for conducting the research and to discuss my ideas with Indian feminist academics. At this time there was a great deal of discussion coming from various actors in relation to the reservation or quota of seats for women in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions. Through discussions I had with various Indian academics, in particular Susheela Kaushik and colleagues at the Women's Studies and Development Centre, University of Delhi, it became apparent that if I was to research women's political participation in India, incorporating a study of women's participation in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions would be both timely and desirable. Researching women's participation in governmental politics and in civil society at the local level has allowed the research to focus on participation per se rather than the technical elements of a particular method or programme. It has also allowed for an element of comparison between these two types of political participation.

It was suggested to me that I work in Rajasthan since there has been and continues to be a limited amount of gender focused research taking place in the state. Bikaner was also decided upon due to the lack of gender focused research in the district and because there were no strong reasons to work in another district.

When initially designing the research I planned to principally investigate changes at the household level. However, it became apparent in the early stages of fieldwork that first, changes in gender dynamics at the household level were extremely difficult to distinguish, without conducting a longer term study over a number of years beginning at the outset of women's incorporation into political participation. Second, the difficulties entailed in and desirability of demarcating the household as separate from the wider family or even the community made me question both the desirability and feasibility of such a study. Power dynamics are greatly influenced by family dynamics beyond the household and fictive kin can be as influential on gendered roles and relations as real kin, in the Rajasthani context, as shall become apparent later in this thesis.

1.2 Research Methods

The primary data was collected between March 2000 and December 2001. Eighteen months of this time was spent in data collection, and two months, half way through, preliminarily analysing the data collected by that point. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in five villages, a peri-urban area and Bikaner town. Since I worked in these seven different places I had a base in Bikaner town and visited the different villages for periods of between three and seven days at a time periodically during the course of the fieldwork. The research methods used were primarily semi-structured and unstructured in-depth recorded interviews, observation (with some participation), and informal conversations with village residents. I conducted a small number of shorter unrecorded interviews with village residents in order to further my understanding of more generalised opinions on, and perceptions of, women's political participation. I also held focus groups with women *sangathan* members and women *Panchayati Raj* representatives. The rationale for choosing these multiple open-ended flexible methods was to give respondents an opportunity to define what they see as important in terms of gender relations and what aspects of these they see as most detrimental to their lives. It was necessary to adopt these types of methods to prevent inappropriate anticipation of the full range of experiences being investigated.

I interviewed women *sangathan* members, current and previous women *panchayat* representatives, male members of their households and a selection of NGO workers. I also had more informal unrecorded conversations with other family members, village residents, other NGO workers and government officials. I was fortunate in that at the time I was conducting the research in Bikaner, one group of women *panchayat* representatives had completed their five year tenure and another group had recently been elected.

I decided to record the majority of the interviews for the usual reasons, such as not missing anything the informant said and to avoid putting my interpretation on to the data at the time of collection. However, another interesting advantage for recording the interviews, rather than note taking, became apparent. The majority of the women I spoke with are illiterate and as a consequence seemed to prefer me recording their voices rather than writing down what they were saying. For instance one woman told me that if I was to write she would not know what I was writing about as she could not read, but when I recorded that was OK because she could listen to what had been said afterwards. It was common that after an interview people would want to listen to their recording.[2]

Unfortunately my language skills were never good enough for me to conduct the interviews in either *Hindi* or *Marwari* (vernacular language of Northwest Rajasthan). Consequently, it was essential for me to work with a research assistant, whose primary role was to act as an interpreter. For most of this time I worked with Monika Gour, a married *Brahmin* woman from Bikaner in her early thirties with two daughters. Monika had previously studied Rajasthani literature, but was not working when I met her. While I may have missed many of the nuances of what was being said, Monika's insights into local gender relations and the empathy and understanding she showed towards the women and their families we spoke with, more than compensated for this. Furthermore her thoughts and opinions on the intricate workings of gender dynamics in the Rajasthani context and the discussions we had as the fieldwork progressed significantly contributed to my understandings of gender relations in the Bikaneri context.

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[2] While I have not referred directly to the literature on research methodology which has influenced my own methodological decisions it is necessary to mention some of the key texts which have influenced these decisions. See, for example, Alcoff and Potter (eds.) (1993); Gorelick (1991); Haraway (1990);

1.3 Organisation Of The Thesis

The thesis is divided into three parts. This Chapter and Chapters Two and Three are concerned with the context of the research: geographical, theoretical and social. Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven present the analysis of the primary data. Chapter Eight concludes and links theoretical understandings with my analysis of the primary data.

This chapter continues, first, by explaining what I take 'political' to mean and by discussing the different conceptualisations of women's political activity in the literature. Second, it describes key geographical, social and political factors of Northwest Rajasthan and Bikaner district in particular. This section also introduces URMUL Trust, the NGO whose *mahila sangathans* I studied. It provides background information on the formation, aims and objectives of the *mahila sangathans* I researched. Third, it provides historical and operational information on the *Panchayati Raj* system of governance. It also describes some of the key factors and historical legacies involved in creating the reservation for women in these institutions. These first sections while providing some analytical discussion are essentially descriptive in nature. However, the final section of this introduction discusses the various ideas around gender and political participation in the literature looking specifically at debates on quotas for women in political bodies and particularly those raised within the Indian context.

Chapter Two provides a more generalised review of the relevant literature discussing the different ways in which power and empowerment have been conceptualised and how both empowerment and participation are used within development discourses and practice. It also discusses the different ways in which gender dynamics have been theorised at the household and family level.

Chapter Three presents ethnographic data collected during the fieldwork period. It does this through an analysis of girls' and women's lives as they move from their status as daughter to that of daughter-in-law and wife, to that of mother, and eventually mother-in-law and grand-mother. It also considers exceptions to this normal life cycle. As such

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Harding (ed), (1987), Harding (1991); Karlekar, (1995); Maynard and Purvis (eds.), 1994; Reinharz, (1992); Schenk-Sandbergen (1995); Stacey (1996)

it highlights the importance of women's changing identities across time, space and place.

Chapter Four is concerned with the motivations of those who initiate and support village women's participation in politics and the reasons women themselves give as to why they are involved. The chapter also discusses more generally attitudes towards women's participation in community development projects and attitudes towards women and corruption. It presents an analysis of women's participation as being located in two sets of rationale, either as 'participation for women's empowerment' or 'women's participation for efficiency'.

Chapter Five through an examination of behaviours deemed appropriate for women participating in politics, argues that particular types of women are deemed as qualified to participate. It considers the ways in which poor, rural women are represented and presented and how this group of women view themselves. As such it draws attention to processes of 'othering' of poor(er), (more) rural, illiterate or less educated women, executed by many urban, or more educated, or middle-class men and women who have informed the research. It discuses the types of knowledge women feel they have gained through their participation and argues for the inclusion of men in gender and development practice.

Chapter Six focuses on women's experiences in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions. It discusses decision making processes leading to women standing for election and argues that political participation is a family matter whether it is a man or a woman who has been elected. It discusses community attitudes towards women's roles in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions and points to the dangers of women's incorporation into these bodies through a quota system.

Chapter Seven discusses power relationships between the different actors considered by the research, including men and women village residents, NGO workers and government officials. The feelings of dependency and despondency expressed by the women who have or are participating in both *Panchayati Raj* institutions and *mahila sangathans* are key themes throughout the chapter. Solidarity among groups of women is explored through an examination of when the *sangathan* members and when the *panchayat* representatives feel united through a shared identity and when they are

divided. It discusses the limitations and the potentials for women's solidarity through both types of participation.

Chapters Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven also draw attention to methodological issues. In particular I discuss issues related to the insider or outsider status of researchers, the telling of multiple truths, strategies of resistance and acceptance exhibited by subjects of the research toward the researcher and the changing nature of people's stories as their perceptions of the research and the researcher change.

Chapter Eight highlights the key themes and arguments of the thesis.

1.4 Defining Politics

I use a broad definition of politics in order to combine an analysis of government regulated political participation and that located in civil society. This definition draws on the work of Afshar (1996), Hensman (1996) and Waylen (1996a, 1996b) among others.[3] These authors are concerned to include the many different political activities women take part in which are often ignored by traditional political science. Hensman (1996) explains how political activity can take on an infinite variety of forms with varying degrees of coherence and stability. Recognition of a multiplicity of strategies for political participation is essential if women's political activity, which is frequently informal and concerned with the 'politics of everyday life', is not to be continually marginalised and ignored. Haider (2000: 89) accepts that there has been a shift in understandings of what constitutes the political realm.

> '[P]olitics today has come to acquire a very wide, expansive and multi-nuanced meaning, which not only embraces formal politics concerning state and citizenship, but has been extended to include the various, diverse strategies and manoeuvres, covert and overt, adopted in any relationship either between individuals or groups including the relationship between the two genders... or in any sphere to gain power, authority and social, political, economic, cultural, symbolic capital.'

My research embraces this idea of a 'multiplicity of ways in which women practice politics' (Radcliff and Westwood, 1993: 20). In the Indian context activities such as street theatre, story telling, crossing spaces traditionally demarcated for different

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[3] For a perspective particularly relevant to India also see Afshar (2003).

genders and castes, village level and larger scale demonstrations[4] as well as participation in the administration of government policies are all defined as political activities.

It is important, however, when looking at women's political activity not to lose sight of, or underestimate their role in formal politics. This is particularly so in the South Asian case, where women heads of state have been a relatively common occurrence. Women have also been governors and chief ministers of states, ambassadors and members of the cabinet and the two houses of parliament.

Waylen (1996a), in fact, brings together an analysis of 'high politics' and 'grassroots political activities', however the areas for analysis in this thesis do not fit into this dichotomy. While it would be accurate to describe the activities of the *sangathans* as grassroots political activities those of the *panchayats* particularly the *gram panchayats* (village councils) and the *samiti panchayats* (sub-district councils), despite being part of the formalised mechanisms of governance and administration cannot be described as high politics. Neither do the areas for investigation in this research fit neatly into the distinction between formal and informal politics. For instance while *Panchayati Raj* institutions are easily recognised as institutions of formal politics, the *mahila sangathans* cannot so easily be described as informal. Although they are not part of the apparatus of government they do have a formal structure: membership is registered with the overseeing NGO; there is a formal hierarchy in place with a chairperson being chosen for each *sangathan* and there are regular meetings and conditions of membership.

Instead Rai's (1996; 2003) concept of politics being either 'in' or 'against' the state is a more useful way to understand the essential differences between women's participation in *Panchayati Raj* institutions and the activities of the *mahila sangathans*. Rai's conceptualisation permits a 'position which allows for a mobilisation of women's interests and their articulation within the space of civil society which... challenge[s] the status quo. In parallel, it... allow[s] for an engagement with the policy-making machinery of the state in order to institutionalize the gains made through discursive and political shifts brought about through these mobilizations'(Rai, 2003: 18).

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[4] See Gandhi and Shah, 1991; Ilaiah, 1992; Kumar, 1993 and Mitra, 1993 for descriptions and analysis of the different and often informal ways in which women have practised politics in the India.

1.5 The Geographical And Social Context

1.5.1 Environment And Livelihoods

Rajasthan is the largest state in India but has one of the lowest population densities and Bikaner is among the least populated districts in the state. Rajasthan is made up of twenty-seven districts, each is divided into administrative *tehsils* (blocks or sub-districts). Bikaner is divided in to four *tehsils*. Each one has an administrative centre, which has the same name as the *tehsil*.

Bikaner district is situated in the Thar desert in Northwest Rajasthan. The Thar is the most populated desert in the world. The district borders Pakistan on its west side and as such is strategically important. The environment and climate are particularly harsh, with impoverished sandy soils, very deep and saline water sources, frequent sand and dust storms, shifting sand-dunes and blazing heat. The region experiences acute water shortages with the underground water table continually falling. There are a few days when it rains between June and September and the odd shower in the winter. Summer temperatures reach highs of 50° celsius, but can fall as low as freezing point, during the winter nights. During my first year of fieldwork the region was experiencing its third consecutive year of drought, culminating in food shortages and a fodder famine. This led to the deaths of thousands of livestock.[5] When the rains did come in that first year they were uncharacteristically heavy leading to unprecedented flooding and the loss of many homes in the rural areas, as they crumbled under the intensity of the water.

Food shortages and drought have been a constant feature of this region. In the local *Marwari* language there are indeed four different words for drought or famine: *Ankal* meaning great famine; *Jalkal* meaning scarcity of water; *Tinkal* meaning scarcity of fodder; and *Trikal* meaning scarcity of fodder, water and grain (Malhotra, 1999: 17). Malhotra (ibid.) cites a Rajasthani saying which illustrates the familiarity of famine in this region of Rajasthan:

> *'Pug Poongal, Sar Merte, Udraj Bikaner, Bhoolo Chukyo Jodphur, thayo Jaisalmer'*
>
> which he translates to mean
>
> 'Famine keeps its legs standing in Poongal region in the heart of the desert, head in Merta, stomach in Bikaner and may move to Jodphur and stays forever in its hometown of Jaisalmer.'

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[5] Since a virus has wiped out much of the vulture population of the region the rotting carcasses of animals were quite a frequent sight.

Henderson (1994: 3) states that abnormal rainfall in Western Rajasthan is so common that, 'it seems as if "normal" rainfall during the monsoon exists more as a normative construct than in reality… "normal" rainfall occurs only during 26% of the weeks when it is expected'.

As a consequence, survival depends on constant adjustments to the vagaries of the environment and the development of imaginative and ingenious survival techniques. These include not only migration and growing drought-resistant crops, but different techniques for collecting water for both agricultural and domestic consumption, using the same water for more than one domestic purpose[6] and an extensive range of fodder and food preservation techniques.[7]

Sixty-five per-cent of the Bikaneri population live in villages, where most people make their livelihoods through agriculture. Of great significance to the region has been the construction of the Indira Ghandi Canal (*Indira Gandhi Nahar Pariyojana,* IGNP), which has caused substantial ecological, economic and social change in the area. This project, of 'greening the desert' by diverting the waters of the river Sutlej, was initiated by Maharajah Ganga Singh of Bikaner after a severe famine in 1899 – 1900. At this stage it was called the Gang canal. By 1927 a network of canals had been constructed into the desert areas of Bikaner. Further development of this project, now called the Indira Gandhi Canal, began in 1958 and is still under construction today. The aims of the project have been to provide water for drinking, irrigation and industrial purposes to Bikaner, Churu, Sri Ganganagar, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Barmer. These have been achieved to varying degrees (Urmul Trust 1992; Government of Rajasthan, 1999). However, it has also caused severe soil salinity and water logging[8], a tragic increase in cases of malaria (Makodi, 1996) as well as huge changes in the social makeup of the

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[6] For example, after eating, hands are always washed over the *thali* (plate) used and then this water is given to the animals to drink. Sand and ash are used to wash eating and cooking utensils. Bathing water is also be used to wash clothes. I would imagine that not only does the shortage of water but also the hours it takes women to collect it, in most circumstances, also inspires them to be frugal in its use.

[7] During the harvesting season it is common to see flat roofs of village homes covered in vegetables being dried in the sun, while every bit of grass that grows between the crops is cut by hand and dried for animal fodder during the leaner months.

[8] The impact of this irrigation project is hard to miss. Tracts of land can be seen which appear white in the sunlight due to the large amount of salt and lack of vegetation. After the rains in 2001 areas of Nakhtarana remained flooded for months due to severe water logging. This was a matter for discussion at successive *panchayat* meetings.

region, including the decimation of semi-nomadic pastoralism in the area.[9] Of the four *tehsils* [blocks] which Bikaner district is administratively divided into, Nokha is the only one which the canal does not reach into. Here irrigation is dependent upon tube wells.

1.5.2 Social Difference And Social Hierarchy

Gender, religious identity, caste or *jati* (sub-caste), and economic class are the most important social stratifiers in the Rajasthani context. The religious makeup of Rajasthan and Bikaner is heterogeneous, with a majority Hindu population and significant minority Muslim and Jain populations. All the villages I conducted the research in were made up of mixed religious and mixed caste populations. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a detailed analysis of these different social stratifiers, however I provide some background information on both caste and gender relations below.

1.5.2.1 Social Difference: Caste

An introduction to caste dynamics is necessary as it was an important consideration throughout the process of data collection[10] as well as having a significant and important impact on political and social interaction and power dynamics at both district and local level.

The traditional view of caste, as most famously explicated by Dumont (1970), sees caste as operating along a single hierarchy from *Brahmin* to 'untouchable'.[11] This hierarchy

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[9] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the impact of the IGNP in detail however for a discussion of its impact on the environment, agriculture and social makeup of the area as well as its strategic importance please see Desai (2003), Gurjar (1992), Hall (1991) the Chapters in Section Three of Hooja and Joshi (1999) and URMUL Trust (1992). Little work is available on the gender impacts of the construction of the canal, however one paper (IDS Jaipur, 1988) that was available found that most of the impacts had been negative and included such things as pastoralist women losing much of their control over productive assets when shifting to settled agriculture, and that the social disintegration caused by relocation of communities was particularly felt by women living under conditions of *purdah* with little mobility.

[10] For example, in one village Monika and I stayed with a Rajput woman, Suman, who was very concerned about the amount of time and interaction Monika, who is *Brahmin*, spent in the *Nayak* and *Mhegwal* communities of the village during the course of our fieldwork. She was particularly keen that Monika would not eat in their houses. Suman was not so concerned about my behaviour as she recognised that I did not have caste. However, I asked why, with this being the case, she did not feel that there was a problem for Monika and herself to be interacting with me. She explained 'you used to rule us so it is OK'. This was the only household we stayed with on a regular basis who were of high caste and so the only place where we encountered these difficulties. In the same village we were visiting the house of a *dholi* (traditionally drummers) family. Although we had previously spent time with the husband we had not met his wife before. She proceeded to bring tea for me but not for Monika. It transpired that the woman had assumed that Monika would not drink tea at her house. What is perhaps most interesting about this event is that it was the only time it happened.

[11] The term untouchable is used in this context as I am talking about traditional understandings of caste hierarchy. In this context it has been the term used to describe those that fall at the bottom or outside of

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is then based on a dichotomous understanding of purity and pollution. This view has now been widely critiqued for its reliance on an interpretation of ancient scriptures and its presentation of Indian villages as culturally and socially static entities, rather than as products of history themselves (Das, 1994; Dirks, 2001; Fuller, 1997; Gupta, 2000).

Gupta (2000) offers an alternative view in which caste hierarchies are seen to operate in differing and complex ways. As such, he criticises both the lay and academic over-simplifications of caste hierarchy. He argues that 'there are probably as many hierarchies as there are castes in India. To believe that there is a single caste order to which every caste, from *Brahmin* to untouchable, acquiesce ideologically, is a gross misreading of the facts on the ground' (ibid: 1). Similarly, Gupta argues that *dalit* communities have not internalised a *Brahmanical* conception of purity and pollution, in which their own bodies are made of impure substances. Low and *dalit* castes do not accept that they are in the subordinate and degraded position they are because of mis-deeds in former lives. If they did there would not have been the succession of caste revolts throughout history that there has been. Similarly, whatever caste a person is from they will always find others who they see as below them.

Gupta (2000: 4) goes on to give examples whereby members of lower caste groups do not accept the orthodox view of their caste position and will instead understand themselves to be, and describe themselves as, belonging to a higher caste group. This was something I experienced myself. For example in one village a particular collection of homes had been empty for some time and I was told that these belonged to *Bhat* families who were currently on their annual migration to Haryana in search of work. When they returned, and I met with some of them for the first time, they told me they are *Rajputs*. This confused me as I had been told by all the other villagers that they are *Bhat*. I expressed my confusion to one of their neighbours who I knew well. She explained that they see themselves as *Rajput* because they had traditionally worked for the *Rajputs*. They evidently saw themselves as coming from the same caste lineage.

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the caste system 'and whose touch and proximity is considered polluting by the caste Hindu' (Sharma, 2000: 77). Alternative ways of describing these communities are now more commonly used. Mahatma Gandhi used the term *harijan*, meaning children of God. Administratively these groups are classified as Scheduled castes. However, the term *dalit*, meaning oppressed, has the most emancipatory political overtones and is considered the least condescending. 'Dalit implies those who have been ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way' (Sharma, 2000: 78) and 'Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution' (Zelliot, 1992: 268 cited in Sharma, 2000: 78). Scheduled castes and tribes account for roughly 22 % of India's population (Gupta, 2000: 105).

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This is not to say that they were not also proud of their *Bhat* identity and on all other occasions they described themselves as *Bhat* to me.

The point of this discussion is to emphasise that caste or *jati* operate, on the ground, in a myriad of complex understandings and social interactions. They are constantly in a state of flux and open to negotiation. For example, while there are still very close associations between a person's caste status and their economic or class position, there are significant exceptions to this. In the Bikaneri context those falling within the higher castes, particularly the *Rajputs*, the previous ruling caste, and the *Baniya*, business people, tend to be the wealthiest. The *Jats*, who politically are categorised as OBC (other backward caste) are some of the largest land owners and among the wealthiest members of the villages as well as having considerable political influence in the state. The lower castes typically the *Meghwal*, the *Nayak* and the *Sansi* are the poorest, often only owning non-irrigated land and working as sharecroppers. However, exceptions can be found. In one village where I worked I was repeatedly told that the *Rajputs* were the poorest group in the village. I also knew *Meghwal* families who owned large areas of relatively productive land and owned considerable assets including livestock and in one case a tractor, a considerable and rare asset in this context.

In making these arguments I do not want to either minimise the importance of caste as a social stratifier or to deny the huge injustices suffered by *dalit* and lower caste communities or disregard the huge impediment caste position can be for social mobility.

Caste identity, however, interacts with other identities as Lodrick (1994: 24) explains:

> 'A Rajasthani farmer, for example, functions in a particular village setting, and shares in the customs and traditions of his village and its surrounding area. Family and *jati* (subcaste) define social and economic relationships. Geographical, rather than social, origins determine which dialects a person speaks. Environment and ecology delimit patterns of economic activity. In addition people operate within the political and administrative structure of the state of Rajasthan.'

Loyalty to ones caste position does not necessarily override other competing identities. Loyalty to ones village may at times be a stronger source of allegiance. An example of the manifestation of this is provided in Chapter Four.

1.5.2.2 Social Difference: Gender

Gender roles and relations in Rajasthan are discussed throughout the thesis, consequently I do not provide a detailed examination here in the introduction. Nevertheless, it is necessary to draw attention to certain gross realities at this point. First, that gender inequity is profound in Rajasthan and particularly the districts of the Northwest. Second, to point to particularities of gender dynamics in the region compared to other areas of India.

The particular vulnerability of women in the area is reflected in statistical information, such as literacy rates and the appalling sex ratio. Whereas India's overall literacy rate is 65.38%, Rajasthan's is 66.40% and Bikaner's drops even lower to 57.54% (Government of India, 2001). Female literacy rates are 54.16%; 44.90% and 42.55% respectively compared with male rates of 75.85%, 75.70% and 70.78%% (Government of India, 2001). By looking at just the rural literacy rates for Rajasthan and Bikaner the lack of education rural Bikaneri women have had access to is all to obvious. Male rural rates for Rajasthan and Bikaner are 72.96% and 61.92% respectively, with female ones dropping to 37.74% and 28.83% respectively (Government of India, 2001).

The overall literacy rates do not show the divergence among different communities. Drèze and Sen (1995: 45) using Government of India data from the 1991 census state that the literacy rate among scheduled caste women in Rajasthan is well below 10%. This was certainly my experience. I did not know one woman from these communities who could read or write. However, on the positive side, many of the daughters of illiterate women could and were attending school, particularly in the villages where URMUL Trust had been working and in Bikaner town itself. Attitudes towards girls and boys education are discussed in Chapter Three.

Sex ratios are perhaps the most illuminating statistic as to the value placed on girls and women in a society. The nuances and contradictions involved in attitudes towards girl children are explored in detail in Chapter Three. While India's overall sex ratio is disturbing enough at 933 women to every 1000 men, Rajasthan's drops to 922:1000 and Bikaner's to 889:1000. The district with the lowest sex ratio in the state is Jaisalmer with a sex ratio of 821:1000 (Government of India, 2001)

Rajasthan has one of the worst sex ratios in India, and Bikaner one of the worst in the state. However, interestingly while there has been some deterioration in sex ratios for the whole of India the Rajasthani rates have in fact improved since the 1991 census. The deterioration has been seen in the wealthier more urbanised states such as Punjab, largely due to the increase in sex selective terminations.

Bikaner itself and Northwest Rajasthan are unique in regard to key gendered practices, affecting women's participation in public life and politics. The literature considering gender in India points to high caste women being more likely to veil and conform to the segregation of space as defined by the ideals of *purdah*, whereas lower caste economically poorer women are less affected by these restrictions (Agarwal, 1994, Franco, Macwan, Ramanathan, 2000). However, in Bikaner it is just as common for low caste women to conform to *purdah* as higher caste women. The reasons put forward for economically poorer women being less likely to conform to purdah are often put down to necessity. That is, low caste women have to work in public spaces, be this petty trading in the urban context or agricultural work in the rural context, both on their own land and as paid workers on others' farms. While women's necessity to take part in productive work is apparent in Bikaner district specific gendered behaviour which maintains the ideals of *purdah* and the sex segregation of space is still subscribed too. Specific examples of this are provided in Chapter Three.

1.5.3 URMUL Trust And The *Mahila Sangathans*

URMUL Trust was formed in 1984 as an off-shoot of the URMUL Dairy which was set up in 1972 to act as a district unit of the Rajasthan Co-operative Dairy Federation. The Trust was initially set up to provide health services to those who were members of the village level milk societies, with the aim of providing health care to the most vulnerable in society. The Trust's outlook changed during the drought of 1987 suffered by Western Rajasthan, in which Bikaner was one the most badly affected areas. The Trust at this time felt that providing employment to people who were facing starvation should be their primary concern. It was within this context that the *sangathans* came into existence. Initially they took the form of village groups who pressurised the district administration to sanction drought relief works (URMUL Trust 1999a, 1999b).

The Trust has always maintained close working links with Government Institutions. The Board of Trustees includes the District Collector, the Chief Medical and Health

Officer of Bikaner district and the Principle of Bikaner Medical College. It also maintains a close relationship with URMUL Dairy. The rationale provided for these close relationships is to avoid duplication of services, gain institutional credibility and ready access to infrastructure (Urmul Trust, 1999a, 1999b). The Trust has also received Government funds for some of its projects. Similarly URMUL administer and implement government funded development programmes.

There are distinct problems associated with having such close links to government officers and bureaucracies. It has made it difficult for employees of the Trust to mobilise people to demand their rights to government services or to challenge corruption within the apparatus of the state. Despite this a main aim of the Trust is to empower groups of people, in particular women, to be able to demand their right to state services and to challenge corruption within the system. This difficult situation is discussed further in Chapter Seven.

URMUL Trust attempts, then, to be both a service provider and an initiator of empowerment. The *mahila sangathans* are seen as the key forums in which to undertake both these tasks. The mission statement of the Trust is:

> '[T]o lead the poor towards self-reliance by making available to them a package of development services they themselves decide on, design, implement and eventually finance.' (URMUL Trust, 1999a: 4)

This document goes on to state:

> '[S]ince it's inception there has been an unflinching commitment towards strengthening the processes of local initiative and leadership both within the organisation and at the village level. Most of the members of the URMUL family are natives from the Thar and only a handful of development professionals come from reputed institutions of higher education.'
> (ibid: 5)

The growth of the Trust was rapid and in order to encourage better management and keep decision-making 'closer to the field', in 1992 it was decided that the Trust would decentralise. It is now made up of a family of eleven organisations with a co-ordination unit based in Bikaner town. These eleven organisations have also enabled the Trust to spread its work beyond the confines of Bikaner district to include Churu, Nagore, Jodphur and Jaisalmer.

The stated basic principles behind the work of this family of organisations remain the same:

> 'Basic work styles, practices and concepts are common across the family. These include honesty, gender sensitivity and an intrinsic faith in the capacity of the rural people to devise and manage development programmes. All the work is focussed on the poorer and marginalized sections of society, and is planned and implemented with the support and participation of the people themselves.' (URMUL Trust, 1999b: 1)

The specific aims and objectives for the *sangathans* are also expressed:

> '*Sangathan* is a platform for people with common interest to come together and deliberate upon their condition in relation to the environment and then engage in some collective action to improve their condition towards a better life, both socially and economically. *Sangathan* also helps its members articulate their views, strengthen their capacities in all possible ways and become aware of the power of collective action. Hence the successful *sangathan* are the true measure of success of participatory development.' (URMUL Trust 1999b: 6)

The objectives for the *mahila sangathans*, which can be found in the Trusts' literature are: that the women members will become responsible for the implementation of development works, that they will become self sustaining institutions in themselves, and, at the same time, they will improve women's basic living conditions.

It can be clearly seen that the declared aims and objectives of URMUL Trust and its family of organisations conform to the principles of participatory development as detailed in Chapter Two. Indeed NGO workers were keen to show me the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques which they use.

The two *mahila sangathans* I researched came under the auspices of URMUL Setu which is based in the *tehsil* in which the Trust has worked for the longest period. The Trust has been working in the two villages where these *sangathans* are based since the late 1980s. The *mahila sangathans* were formed in the early 1990s. The vast majority of the women members are from *dalit* castes and all are from the poorest communities in their villages. They have undertaken many different activities. They have regular monthly meetings with a member of staff from URMUL Trust present. Each one operates a savings scheme which they can draw on in the event of an unexpected financial hardship. Much of the Trust poverty relief and health work is undertaken within the auspices of the *mahila sangathans*. They are involved in the organisation of

paid work as a form of drought relief organised by the Trust. They have been involved in taking over and farming state owned land as well as being involved in struggles over land rights in one village and in accessing canal water in another. They have also been involved in protest activities around securing teachers come to the village, raising awareness around rape cases and domestic violence. Some of the women have also been involved in larger demonstrations in Jaipur and Delhi.

1.6 Political Context

The state of Rajasthan was formed out of a collection of nineteen heterogeneous princely states which acceded to the Government of India on 25th March, 1948 to become the state of Rajasthan. Panagariya and Pahariya (1996: 11) describe the people of Rajasthan as having up until that point, 'for generations been the victims of [a] "triple slavery", i.e. the slavery of the British, the princes and the Jagirdars [feudal land-lords]'. An opinion that was echoed by some of those I spoke with in the villages of Bikaner. They also added to this the injustices they face under the corrupt nature of the current political system.

Björkman and Chaturvedi, (1994: 132) point to two significant factors in Rajasthan's political history, which have influenced politics in the state in particular ways. First, due to Rajasthan's previous status as a collection of princely states and the autocratic rule of the *Maharajas* the people of Rajasthan had not experienced the growth of representative government. Second, Rajasthan, compared to the areas under direct British rule, experienced little of the political organisation and mass participation of the independence movement. Even the Indian National Congress had not organised directly in princely India but had worked through the *Praja Mandals*, also called the State Peoples' Freedom Movements, which were popular organisations and committees sponsored by the Congress. Björkman and Chaturvedi (1994:139) argue that the movements against princely rule and involvement in the struggle for independence in Rajasthan were uncoordinated and largely ineffective and '[t]hus the political legacy with which the new state of Rajasthan had to contend was one of fragmented leadership and a relatively low level of popular participation'.

The organised movements and mass protests Björkman and Chaturvedi (1994) do discuss, which started in the 1920s, had their impetus more in the repressive policies of the *Rajas* and the *Jagirdars* (feudal landlords) than the surge in protest against colonial

rule. Vidal (1997) draws attention to other traditional forms of protest, in Rajasthan, such as tribal rebellions, threats to migrate, threats of collective suicide and fasting to death, by *Brahmins* particularly, and the use or threat of *saati* by certain caste groups. Violence against the self has been and continues to be a relatively common form of protest in India.

1.6.1 History And Structure Of *Panchayati Raj*

Panchayat literally means 'assembly of five'. Village and caste *panchayats* have been a form of local governance in Indian villages since before colonial domination. These 'traditional' caste and village *panchayats* still operate today although it was reported to me that many have broken down and their authority has weakened[12]. The history of state legislation giving powers to the *panchayats* stretches back to at least before Independence, with Bikaner enacting the Village Panchayat Act in 1928. This gave the state the power to declare any area could be governed by a panchayat of five to eight elected members. In 1949 the Government of Rajasthan passed a *Gram Panchayat* Act setting up *panchayats* in the districts, which had judicial powers. These *Nyaya* (legal) panchayats had responsibilities in both civil and criminal law. In 1953 an act was passed giving *panchayat* institutions responsibility for funding coming from the Community Development Programme of 1952 (Mayaram, 2000: 24).

However, a national system of Panchayati Raj with the explicit aim of democratic decentralisation was not formally introduced in India until 1959, on the recommendation of the Balwantray Mehta Report (1957). The Balwantray Mehta report was the outcome of a commission to examine the problems faced by the community Development Programme, which had been initiated during the first five year plan of the Government of India 1952. The panchayats were to be given the necessary powers and authority to function as units of self-government. The report recommended the decentralisation of administrative functions and local participation in development planning (Datta, 1998). The first states to implement this *Panchyati Raj* system were Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh in 1959. Indeed Rajasthan was the first state to hold *panchayat* elections in Nagaur on 2nd October, 1959 and Nehru inaugurated the first *Panchayat* (Mayaram, 2000: 24-25).

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[12] This was an opinion expressed by local NGO workers and village residents. However, AnanthPur (2004) and Krishna (2002) report on their continued prevalence.

Bryld (2001) draws attention to the decentralising aspect of Panchyati Raj, arguing that this is in line with recent development strategies of good governance, local governance, participation and decentralisation. These have recently come to be more widely recognised important requisites for and measurements of social, political and economic development. In this discourse decentralisation is assumed to create good governance. Decentralisation demands that those either further down the governmental institutional hierarchies and/or those previously excluded from decision-making participate further. Good governance is seen to be an outcome of such participation, through an increase in transparency and appropriate policy making and implementation.

Datta (1998) argues that since the *panchayati raj* institutions lacked both constitutional support and political will these bodies remained weak institutions with inadequate powers and resources. Gala (1997) also points to the centralising tendencies, which have undermined the *panchayat* system since its instigation. The Balwantray Mehta Committee saw that the role for the Panchayats was to implement development programmes that had been formulated in the centre. A centralised political and economic system had been initiated by the colonial system and reinforced by the post independence government of India. The villages were seen as backward and socialism was merely interpreted as central planning and public sector control. The draft constitution did not even mention *gram swaraj* (village rule) until Gandhi objected and article 40 was incorporated which recommended the formation of the *gram panchayats*.

Mayaram (2000: 25) reports that the 1960s were the golden era of *Panchayati Raj* in Rajasthan, with the *panchayats* being powerful in the initial stages and all village level government officials being connected to the *panchayats*. Even during this period as Pai (2000: 130) argues, the *panchayats* were dominated by upper caste wealthy men leaving little representation of women, the poor and lower castes. Elections 'were a means by which the former were able to consolidate power in the countryside'. The 1970s saw the decline of *panchayat* powers with a move to centralise. *Panchayati Raj* elections were held in 1960, 1965, 1978, 1982 and 1988. After this elections were indefinitely postponed. For a long time the *Panchayat* Institutions languished in limbo until the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution were passed (Mayaram, 2000).[13]

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[13] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the intricacies of the history of Panchayati Raj or the political system of Rajasthan in detail, for more information see Hooja and Hooja (1998); Jain (1993); Panagariya and Pahariya (1996); Sharma and Sharma (eds.) (1999); Yugandhar and Datta (1995). For an historical perspective on local governance in India see Khanna (1999).

Panchayati Raj acts as a three-tier system of governance and administration made up of *gram panchayats* (village councils), *panchayat samitis* (block level councils) and the *zilla parishad* (district level council). The *gram panchayats* are made up of directly elected *ward panches* (representatives of each ward of the village or villages), a directly elected *sarpanch* (chairperson) and an *up-sarpanch* (deputy *sarpanch*) who is elected by the members of the *gram panchayat*. Each *gram panchayat* has a *gram sevak* (secretary), a civil servant who manages panchayat affairs and counter signs cheques and orders along with the *sarpanch*. It has both administrative and decision making powers and is required to meet twice a month. Although *panchayats* are legally empowered to collect taxes the vast majority of funding comes from the centre through specific rural development schemes. The largest ones are *Jawahar Rozgar Yojana* (JRY) which aims to combat rural unemployment and the *Indira Awas Yojana* (IAY) and the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP). The next level is the *panchayat samiti* which is made up of directly elected representatives, but *sarpanches* within its jurisdiction regularly attend meetings. It is chaired by an indirectly elected *pradham*. It as an advisory body and required to meet once a month. The *zilla parishad* is again made up of directly elected representatives, has an indirectly elected chair known as the *zilla pramukh,* but its membership also includes Ministers of Legislative Assemblies and Members of Parliament who have a right to vote on all matters, except the removal of the *zilla pramukh* and the *zilla up-pramukh* (UMA Resource Centre, 1995). It is an advisory body and is required to meet once every three months. Also of importance to *Panchayati Raj* system of governance are the *gram sabhas,* which meet twice yearly, all voters are members of the *gram sabha*. It gives villagers the opportunity to meet with their elected representatives and confront them with what they are not satisfied with as well as make suggestions and give their ideas. It is argued that the 'gram sabha is the very bedrock of panchayati raj, it is through the gram sabha that the elected representative is made accountable to the electorate' (Meenakshisumdaram, 1997: 551).

1.6.2 Reservation Policy In India

Reservation has been an issue in India since at least Independence. Ambedkar supported a system of reservation for all non-*brahmins*, which he then reduced to argue for reservation for the scheduled castes specifically (Corbridge and Harris, 2000: 212). Indeed the idea of affirmative action through reservations is enshrined in the Indian

constitution (Rai, 1999). The issue of women's reservation was discussed during the nationalist struggle, but opposed as it deflected from the demand for universal franchise (Raman: 2002). In 1955 the first backward castes commission identified 2,399 backward castes and recommended a reservation of 70%, reflecting their representation in the population of India, in all technical and professional institutions for backward caste students who were appropriately qualified. It also stated that women should be recognised as a backward caste and be given a quota in the civil service of between 20 and 40% depending on the grade. The Nehru government did not accept these reservations and instead states were asked to draw up their own lists. The Southern states were more inclined to do this than the Northern ones demonstrating the greater strength of the lower castes in South compared to North India (Corbridge and Harris, 2000: 219)

Raman (2002) discusses the impacts that the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) and its 1974 report had on the women's reservation debate. The report pointed to the fact that despite equal rights and universal franchise being enshrined in the Indian Constitution, women's presence in state and central legislatures had been declining since Independence. Raman (2002: 2) sees arguments in support of reservation as coming, at the time, from women activists and those against reservation coming from women legislators who 'were of the opinion that women's reservation would be retrogressive and would contradict the principle of equality guaranteed in the constitution'. Interestingly, Raman (2002: 2) reports that while the majority of the CSWI was against reservation for women at national and state level, there was a general agreement on 'the need for reservations for women in the local bodies so as to ensure the interests of rural poor women' (my emphasis). There were also two notes of decent in favour of reservation. Rai (1999: 93) states that the consensus on reservations for women at the local level has been more stable and consensual than that at the national level.

In 1977, the CSWI recommended a reservation of two seats in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions for women. They continued to recommend that there should be no reservation in legislative assemblies or in parliament (Menon, 1999: 27). Although no action was taken at the central level three states, Andhra Pradesh, Kanartaka and West Bengal, did bring in a policy of reservation of between 22-25% (Chauhan, 1998).

Kanartaka was the first to bring in a reservation of 25% across all levels of the panchayat system in 1987.

No further action was taken until the Seventy-Third and Seventy-Fourth Amendments to the constitution were passed, in December 1992 and came into effect in April 1994. These brought in a 33% reservation of seats to women, as well as reservations for scheduled castes and tribes. This amendment has attempted to strengthen and legitimise the *Panchayat Raj* institutions through constitutional recognition and as a process of decentralisation. The reservation has provided not only a 33% quota of seats for members of the *panchayats* but also a 33% reservation for the chairpersons. The Seventy-Fourth amendment gave reservation to women in the municipal councils. The amendments through their reservation of seats for scheduled castes and tribes and women is attempting to enforce the participation of those who have most usually been excluded from decision making bodies. The Seventy-Third Amendment requires each state to set up three tiers of *Panchayat Raj* and establish *gram sabhas*, hold periodic elections and establish a statutory State Finance Commission for these bodies. It lists twenty-nine subjects for which *Panchayati Raj* will be responsible. The Seventy-Third Amendment came into force in Rajasthan on 23rd April 1994 (Krishna, 1997; Mayaram, 2000; Uma Resource Centre, 1995).

While quotas for scheduled castes and tribes had been in place for a long time what was new as a national policy was the reservation for women and is arguably the most important aspect of the amendment. The first elections to the *panchayat* institutions after the Seventy-Third Amendment were held in 1995 and brought almost one million women into political institutions of local government. For most commentators this is seen to herald a revolutionary change in the political scene at the local level and hold enormous potential for the empowerment of women. The second round of elections was held in 2000.

It is important to note that the quotas for women did not happen because of a mass movement making demands for reservation. Instead women's organisations were caught unaware and unprepared for this drastic change (Nanivadekar, 1998; Vyasulu and Vyasulu; 1999).

1.7 Debates About Quotas For Women In Political Institutions

My research is primarily concerned with the relationship between participation and women's empowerment rather than the pros and cons of quotas for women in government institutions per se or debates around the different kinds of quota systems. Despite this it necessary to address arguments for and against quotas for women in political institutions, for two reasons. First, half of the empirical data collected focuses on women who have entered politics through a quota system and second as I argue in Chapters Four and Six, the way in which women come to be participating influences the outcomes of their participation.

It should be noted, before I begin this discussion, that there tends to be a confusion in some of the literature as well as the responses I received on the ground, between arguments for women's greater presence and participation in politics and arguments for and against a quota system to get them there. I attempt here not to replicate this confusion.

Debates about quotas for women in political bodies can be located in wider debates around the idea of a 'politics of presence' which challenge the traditional understandings of representation through a 'politics of ideas' (Phillips, 1995: 5).

> 'Many of the current arguments over democracy revolve around what we might call demands for political presence: demands for the equal representation of women with men; demands for a more even-handed balance between the political inclusion of groups that have come to see themselves as marginalized or silenced or excluded. In this major reframing of the problems of democratic equality, the separation between "who" and "what" is to be represented, and the subordination of the first to the second, is very much up for question. The politics of ideas is being challenged by an alternative politics of presence'.

Phillips (1995: 22-24) summarises the arguments against the ascendancy of the 'politics of presence' over a 'politics of ideas'. I point to the two most relevant in my research. First, the 'politics of ideas' is concerned with differences of opinion and policy formulation which cut across divisions of race, class, gender and so forth, thereby securing alliances across different social groups. Men join forces with women to promote sexual equality; white people join forces with black people to promote racial equality and so on and so forth. 'A politics that gives increased weight to social identities may block the very alliances that are necessary for change' (ibid: 23).

Likewise, I add individual women do not always promote policies encouraging the empowerment of women as a group.

Second, the 'politics of presence' relies on an 'implausible essentialism' which presumes all women or all people of a particular race or ethnicity have identical interests (Phillips, 1995: 24). Not only does a 'politics of presence' presume particular social groups have particular shared interests it also assumes a shared prioritisation of any interests which may indeed be shared. These arguments all belong to discourses concerned with the advantages and or necessity of having a greater presence of marginalised groups in representative politics. I now address quotas for women more specifically.

There has been an increased demand for quotas globally over the last decade (Rai, 2003; Tinker, 2004). This is matched by the speed in which quotas are being introduced all over the world, with over twenty-five countries having now adopted some form of quota system (Tinker, 2004: 532). In South-East Asia this phenomenon has now become known as 'quota fever' (Dahlerup, 1997: 2).

Arguments for and against quotas are located in the conflicting conceptualisations of gender equality and gender difference (Jaquette, 2001; Tinker, 2004). Equality or sameness and difference have always been at the heart of debates concerned with gender issues (for instance see Irigaray, 1993; Jagger, 1990; Moore, 1993; Phillips, 1992 among others).

Tinker (2004) points to the contradictory nature of the argument for quotas based on the desire for equality. The equality argument is concerned with women's right to political participation in institutions of governance. The number of women participating is seen as important in these arguments, Tinker (2004) argues. However, if the argument rests on equality then surely all people should have equal access and singling certain groups out for special access goes against the principles of equality. Why is it more equitable to give a woman from a middle-class politically inclined family greater ease of access than a poor man with no political connections? 'After all women are seldom a minority of citizens; why do they need distinct treatment?' (Tinker, 2004: 532). As such quota systems are opposed on the grounds that they are inherently undemocratic (Rai, 1999: 94-5)

Rai (1999: 92 - 93) answers these questions and outlines the justifications for a system of quotas for women. Primary in this justification is that quotas compensate for social barriers which have prevented women entering politics and having their voices heard. Quotas are, therefore, seen to be a compensatory regime acknowledging social and historical exclusion of social groups. Quota systems are also seen as the most effective way to overcome the reality that political parties' recruitment processes are 'supported by a framework of patriarchal values'. Quotas are also simply seen as the most effective way of ensuring women's presence if not their genuine participation.

Menon (1999: 28) furthers this point raising the argument that quotas lead to a large increase in women's presence in one go and therefore help to overcome 'their inhibitions' leading, in turn, to effective participation. Indeed the idea of a 'critical mass' has developed among some feminist political scientist who argue that there is a point at which the 'effect of increasing the numbers of women in politics accelerates and makes further increases inevitable' (Lovenduski, 2001: 744). For instance, 30% was the threshold set by the United Nations in 1995 as the percentage of women representative needed for women to be fairly represented (ibid).

The second justification, based on the idea or difference rests on the notion that 'women have distinctly different priorities in life and in governance' (Tinker, 2004: 532). One side to this argument is related to the idea that women have distinct interests and due to this having greater numbers of women entering political institutions will lead to a more feminist agenda. This argument does not necessarily tally with the idea of using quota systems to bring them there. However, it is used to defend a quota system for women. It has been criticised on the basis that women cannot be regarded as a homogeneous group with the differences between them precluding the value of such a quota system (Rai, 1999: 94-5).

The other side to this argument is that due to women's either 'natural' or socially constructed characteristics they will change political systems for the better. This argument most commonly rests on women being identified as mothers, which Jaquette (2001: 122) refers to as 'maternal feminism'.

'[I]t's the idea to bring the housekeeping and nurturing skills of women into corrupt and ineffective councils, especially at local levels, so that roads are paved, schools built, and water provided?' (Tinker, 2004: 532).

This argument is commonly used as a justification for quotas since it argues that not only will women benefit as a group but political systems and society as a whole will benefit from their inclusion. Therefore, it is just to use a quota system to incorporate women into institutions of governance. This argument has been used instrumentally to argue for a quota system. It implies that while women can change political systems from the inside due to the patriarchal masculinist nature of politics they won't be able to get there without a reservation of seats for women.

These arguments are countered by pointing to the many examples of women politicians who do not conform to such constructs of maternal good governance. They have been criticised for reinforcing gender stereotypes and denying women the ability to define their interests as individuals rather than as mothers (Jacquette, 2001; 122). I discuss the justification for quotas for women in the Indian context based on their perceived greater probity and altruism and point to the dangers of such instrumentalist arguments in detail in Chapter Four.

A further point for consideration which is raised by Lokaneeta, (2000: 43) is that reservations have in fact been used as a process to de-radicalise the idea of women's empowerment:

'[T]he state has appropriated the discourse of women's empowerment in order to nullify the emancipatory potential of the concept and reduced it to signify a demand for political participation defined only in terms of reservations into a given set of political institutions'.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that all major political parties in India are in support of the women's reservation in the *panchayats*. But at the same time the number of women in the higher echelons of these parties is low and the number of women candidates they put forward to state and national legislatures is very low (Kondreday, 2000; Lokaneeta, 2000). Menon (1999: 28), however, sees the lack of women's representation in political parties as a reason for reservation. That is if the parties are not going to support women in gaining political office then a reservation is going to be necessary in order to get them there.

The appropriation of the discourse of empowerment and the consequent de-radicalisation of the term is discussed in the Chapter Two.

In the Indian context specifically it is asked whether the India system can cope with another divisive issue? Ella Bhat[14] (1996: 13, cited in Rai, 1999) also raises a practical and ethical objection to the quota system in the *panchayat* institutions when she asks:

> 'how can these poor women *panches* oppose the same men whose fields they work in for their livelihood? First organise them and put economic power in their hands, only then can they oppose them'.

I would add to this list, as will be come apparent through out the analysis of my data, the necessity of literacy for non-dependent political participation.

1.8 Conclusion

This introductory chapter has pointed to some of the arguments which are made in the thesis and indicated the chapters where they are discussed. It has provided background information on the social, geographical and political context of Rajasthan. It has drawn attention to the unique nature of gender relations in Northwest Rajasthan. The quota for women in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions has been set in the historical context of a relatively common system of reservation for marginalised groups in India.

The final section of the chapter engaged with some of the more general arguments for and against reserved seats for women in political institutions. The next chapter continues to engage with the literature principally by discussing understandings of power, empowerment and participation.

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[14] The founder of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

CHAPTER TWO
POWER, EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION

2.1 Introduction

Central to the key themes of this thesis, gender, politics, empowerment and participation, is the concept of power. Gender essentially describes a relationship between men and women based on power differentials whereby neither gender is all-powerful or totally powerless, but in which power is skewed in favour of men, in most societies. Politics in essence is the practice of power. Empowerment finds its origins in the concept of power. Participation, as used in the development literature, has, in theory, aimed to change the power relations between experts and development professionals and the recipients of development.

A central dynamic of the relationships among the different actors who informed my research in Bikaner is power. For instance, the dynamics between: local NGOs and those in the communities they aim to develop; between castes, classes, generations and genders within those communities; between local NGOs and national and international donor organisations; between government bureaucrats and political representatives and among political representatives themselves.

As such, this chapter begins by considering different understandings of power within the literature in order to examine their relevance to the manner in which power exhibits itself in the area of the study. I do not argue in favour of one theorisation against another but instead argue that each of these understandings of power provides different insights into how power operates in the social world. For example, an analysis of power that focuses on its conflictual nature is only problematic if it denies the potential for power to also operate through consensus. Likewise, acknowledging strategies of resistance used by those who appear to have the least amount of power, in a given social order, provides a limited understanding of power if the dominant hierarchies of power are at the same time ignored. This section, of the Chapter, draws primarily on the work of Steven Lukes (1974) and Foucault (1980). It presents their ideas and critiques them.

The next section discusses how both empowerment and participation have been used in development discourses. I present an understanding of empowerment as a process where by an individual or social group increase the amount of power they have over

time in a particular context. I recognise there to be different types of empowerment, principally empowerment of the individual and empowerment of a particular social group. I also point to certain dangers in the use of empowerment; principally that the overuse of the concept has led to a lessening of its effectiveness as a tool for social mobilisation and its potential to take the focus away from the responsibility of the state and those at the centre of development projects.

The final section of the chapter discusses how power is seen to operate at household and family level. It presents both conceptual and practical criticisms of the unitary model of the household and discusses how household power relations are seen to operate within bargaining models. While recognising Sen's (1990) conception of household gender relations being based on co-operation and conflict as the most useful conceptualisation it also uses the work of Kabeer (1994), Kandiyoti (1998) and Agarwal (1997) to interrogate and expand upon this model.

2.2 Conceptualising Power

I begin this section by presenting the work of Lukes (1974). Despite having been written three decades ago it continues to provide one of the best accounts of how power is conceptualised. His analysis is divided into three distinctly progressive sections: the 'one-dimensional view', the 'two-dimensional view' and the 'three-dimensional view'. The first two draw predominantly on the work of other scholars and the third is his conception of power.

In the 'one-dimensional view' Lukes draws on the work of pluralists, such as Dahl (1957), who are concerned with observable behaviour, primarily within decision making processes: one of the most easily recognisable forms of power in operation. In this perspective the person who prevails in the decision making process is the one assumed to have most power. Direct conflict is seen to be the best test of ability to affect outcomes. Lukes describes this as one-dimensional since direct conflict, whereby all parties come to the decision making arena, fully conscious of their own preferences and interests, is seen to be the only dynamic of power.

The 'two-dimensional view' refers to the work of Bachrach and Baratz (1962). It adds to the first dimension by recognising that power is operationalised in order to constrain what comes to the decision making agenda in the first place. Such control over what is

decisionable is maintained through the creation and reinforcement of certain social norms. Furthermore, it is accepted that power can operate unconsciously, 'to the extent that a person or group – consciously or unconsciously – creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962: 8 cited in Lukes 1974: 15).

Lukes makes a distinction between power as authority, described as compliance based on generalised values, and power as coercion, described as compliance where there is no choice to do otherwise. It should be noted, however, that non-compliance with generalised norms and values is often something individuals have little choice in since the consequences of such non-compliance, such as social exclusion, are too detrimental to be seen as any type of real choice. Examples of this type of social pressure are provided in Chapter Three.

In a similar vein, Skalnik (1999: 163) makes a distinction between what he calls authority as opposed to power. In his work, 'authority is the right to act and make laws, power is understood as an ability to enforce obedience.... Thus right stands against coercion, recognised ability against force or the threat of it'. It should be noted that Skalnik is looking specifically at formal political power.

In the 'two-dimensional view' of power non-decisions are themselves seen as observable and as empirically measurable non-events. In this view power is only recognised to be operating if there is a grievance between two actors or groups of actors. It is assumed that if no grievance can be empirically uncovered no interests are being harmed. The stress, therefore, is still on observable conflict.

Instead, in Lukes' own conception of power, the 'three-dimensional view', he argues that the most 'effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict arising in the first place' (ibid: 23):

> '[I]s it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial.'

He argues that people's wants are constructed by social systems which may in fact be working against their real interests. From this standpoint Lukes goes on to state that any view of power rests on some normatively specific conception of interests, with the 'one-dimensional view' being aligned to a liberal conception of interests and the two-dimensional view being reformist and his own three dimensional view being radical.

Kabeer (1994: 227) applies Lukes' analysis of power to gender relations stating that:

> '[S]ocial rules, norms, values and practices play a critical role in concealing the reality and pervasiveness of male dominance and defusing gender conflict.'

However, she also problematises his work for relying on the idea of false consciousness as it implies that women are not aware of their own interests. Instead, she argues that women may in fact evade or even diffuse potentially conflictual situations because they are aware that 'the rules of the game are loaded against them' (ibid); the costs of conflict may be higher in the immediate situation.

Kabeer does acknowledge that even though women may be aware of the circumscribed nature of their lives they may not know what to actually do in order to bring about change.

Haugaard (2002) further critiques Lukes' idea of power operating through false consciousness as it lends itself to conspiracy theories in which large sections of society believe a false truth which is in the interests of a dominant group or class. I argue however that false consciousness is as much a reality for dominant groups as the less powerful. The nature of power structures, how and why they work, is often no more apparent or perceptible to dominant groups and if anything may in reality be less so. In the case of gender dynamics men are just as likely to believe that certain characteristics of femininity which keep women in a subordinate position are natural or preordained. In fact it is most usually women who reveal the falseness of such claims. Pheterson (1990: 34) acknowledges the idea of internalised domination as well as internalised oppression:

> '*Internalized oppression* is the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society.... Internalized oppression is the mechanism within an oppressive system for perpetuating domination not only by external control but also by building subservience into the minds of the oppressed groups.'

and

> '*Internalized domination* is the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a
> dominant group of prejudices against others.... Internalized domination perpetuates
> oppression of others and alienation from oneself by either denying or degrading all but a
> narrow range of human possibilities.' (her emphasis)

However, it must be noted as Mitchell (1990) and Kandiyoti (1998: 142) point out, dominant groups are in a far better position 'to change the rules of the game unilaterally'.

A further critique of Lukes' analysis, and one which he refers to himself, is that of the methodological difficulties of empirically seeing the practice of power when it is hidden within the norms and values of a given social group or society. This is important as Lukes argues that his understanding of power is empirically operational and useful. He answers the criticism in two ways. On a practical level by suggesting that we ask why things do not happen in certain places when they do in others.

Importantly, Lukes while acknowledging the methodological difficulties inherent in his standpoint points out that:

> 'It does not follow that, just because it is difficult or even impossible to show that power
> has been exercised in a given situation, we can conclude that it has not.' (ibid: 39)

It could be argued, if power is hidden within cultural norms and values researchers who come from outside the social group or society being studied are more likely to see power operating which is hidden within embedded cultural norms and values.[1] In making this argument the researcher(s) would necessarily need to not only be able to 'see through' said norms and values but to also have not internalised any socially structured norms or values of their own. This would imply that the observer(s) would be able to see where the 'true' interests of the observed lie. As if the person who identifies true consciousness has access to some transcendental realm of real interest (Haugaard, 2002). This is now well recognised within social science research to be an impossible position to fulfil.

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[1] It is important to note that for historical and economic reasons it is far more common for those coming from the West to be looking at those of the Third World. Which leads me to ask how many more insights could be gained as to how gender dynamics operate within Western societies if those coming from such different cultures and social context were to study us as we study them.

The work of Foucault has drawn attention to the futility of searching for truth beyond the distortion of social relations. Or to put it another way, the impossibility of acquiring undistorted knowledge. Whereas, in the modernist perspective the relationship between power and knowledge is seen as a negative one in that power simply distorts truth (Haugaard, 2002), in the work of Foucault (1980) power and knowledge are essentially dependent upon one another:

> '[B]asically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of the association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth' (ibid: 93 - 133).

Truth is therefore not seen as something beyond this world only reached by those able to liberate themselves from the world but instead it is constructed within societies. Different societies have different 'regimes of truth' or politics of truth: discourses which are accepted as true. These discourses which maintain power dynamics through the acceptance of particular knowledges are what Foucault refers to as 'technologies of normalisation'.

Foucault challenges the notion that power can only be defined as an organ of repression and also the idea that some exclusively possess it while others merely submit to it. His analysis of power shows it to be something which circulates, which operates through a net-like organisation in which individuals act, 'simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power' (ibid: 98). In this analysis, domination is not theorised in the context of that which one person or group of people have over others but instead manifold and multiple forms of domination and subjugation are seen to operate within social organisms.

Although Foucault (1980) does acknowledge global structures of domination that exist within social orders he argues that the concern should be with power at its extremities. As such, an analysis of power should not start from the centre and look at how it permeates down through society but instead should start from its peripheries and work in ascension.

Foucault and, later, postmodernist writers[2] have been criticised for their over emphasis on the minuscule and multitudinous elements of power at the expense of over arching structures of power which dominate the lives of individuals and groups within social organisation. For example, Nussbaum (1999) has criticised postmodernism for encouraging a focus on the more egalitarian structures of power at the expense of recognising that most power operates on the level of domination and exploitation.

Other scholars[3] have drawn our attention to the ethnocentric privileging of western ideas as truth and real as oppose to the social systems, traditions and religious practices of other societies which often appear false to westerners. This is perhaps the way in which postmodern ideas have proven most useful in the field of development studies and in particular the area of gender and development.

2.3 The Engagement Between, Postmodernism And Feminism

Feminists, including those working on development issues, have engaged both critically and more positively with postmodernist ideas. Mohanty (1991), Nicholson (1990), Ong (1988) and Parpart (1993) and Spivak (1987, 1988, 1990), have embraced or used postmodernist thought. Mohanty (1991) using post-modern discourse analysis deconstructs a series of books on Third World women, published by Zed Press, to highlight the essentialising of Third World women by Western feminist writers and Third World scholars who use identical analytical strategies. In doing so she shows how Third World women have been characterised by their victim status, with women from different regions, cultures, classes, ethnicities and sexualities presented as 'a singular monolithic subject' (ibid: 51). She argues that western women through their representations of Third World women have become the standard of liberated womanhood. Since all scholarship is political in nature it is always more than merely the creation of knowledge but is instead part of the production of power relations. As such Mohanty (1991: 53-4) argues that:

> '[T]he feminist writings I analyze here discursively colonize the material and historical
> heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a
> composite, singular 'third world woman' – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed,
> but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western hegemonic
> discourse.... It is in this process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the

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[2] See Derrida (1995); Habermas (1988); Lyotard (1984)
[3] See Bhabha (1994); Joseph, Reddy and Searle-Chatterjee (1990); Said (1979)

oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent Western Feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named.'

Parpart (1993) is concerned with the way in which postmodernist scholarship, through its search to understand the construction of social meaning, has focused attention on difference. It must, however, be acknowledged that although it can be said that postmodernist scholarship has drawn welcome attention to difference as Udayagiri (1995) points out postmodernists have not been the first to acknowledge difference. Activists and policy-orientated researchers as well as writers of ethnographic accounts have also focused on differences.

Drawing on the work of Derrida (1976) Parpart argues that western scholarship has been constructed on the bases of binary opposites: false/truth, man/woman and so on. In this, dominant meanings are created through a comparison with their 'other'. It has been well established in western feminist writing, most importantly the work of de Beauvoir (1953) that woman has been defined as 'other' to man. Likewise, both Parpart and Mohanty argue that Third World women have been represented as an undifferentiated 'other' to western women.[4]

Partpart does acknowledge the criticism of feminist writers such as Walby (1990) and Hartsock (1990), who argue that postmodernism has little to say about systematically unequal relations of power and how these relations are structured, as well as the potential postmodernist analysis has of leading to mere empiricism. Parpart, therefore, argues that Foucault's focus on the specificity and multiplicity of power, rather than being post-feminist, in fact contributes to the affirmation of a feminist politics which is plural, anti-essentialist, complex and multi-layered. This, she states, bodes well for a global feminist understanding. However, she does not want to 'throw out the baby with the bath water' and discard analysis concerned with the larger structural constraints women face. Instead she states that postmodern analysis can simply be added to these:

'I am not suggesting that we abandon the materialist socialist-feminist concern with gender and class, but rather that we add to it a postmodern feminist analysis of discourse, knowledge/power relations and difference.' (ibid: 454)

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[4] See also Lazreg (1988), Sen and Grown (1987) for critiques of western feminism's presentation of Third World women.

2.4 Finding Power: Resistance

Coinciding with, and influenced by, Foucault's understanding of the practice of power, which ultimately asserts that power not only operates as domination over others but also in various forms of resistance to dominant norms and social structures, have come a number of writings on how the less or least powerful resist the nature of their domination. The scope of what is meant by resistance is wide from those strategies of resistance commonly referred to as 'moments of resistance' or 'everyday forms of resistance' to widely recognised types of mass protest or rebellion. There is perhaps a third type of resistance to be identified which Okely (1991) describes through her ethnographies of a First World War deserter and a Normandy woman dairy farmer who rejects technological interventions in farming. In these the resisters *openly and visibly* withdraw from and refuse to comply with the generalised norms and expected behaviour of the societies in which they live.

While conducting the empirical research for this study I met with women who were not conforming to generalised norms. However, the non-compliance which was observed could not be put into this category because the challenge to recognised norms of behaviour was legitimised; either through the intervention of an NGO or through government legislation. Consequently, these interventions were able to bring about a mutation in norms of behaviour, which are anyway always in flux. Consequently, this third type of resistance is important to note but will not be discussed at length.

Of more relevance to this research is the idea of everyday forms of resistance. Scott's influential work, *Weapons of the Weak* (1985: XVI) identifies these everyday acts of resistance as, 'foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so on', stating that they require no co-ordination or planning and are acts of 'individual self-help; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority' (ibid: XVI).

While I identify ways in which people do resist conformity to the lives prescribed for them by social norms in Rajasthan, I also believe that there are dangers in either overemphasising the importance or these everyday acts of resistance or in romanticising them. This is a charge Gupta (2001) makes of Scott's (1985) conclusions. Gupta argues that stories of resistance, as told by the rich about the poor, are not only exaggerated but also a stratagem on the part of those in power to justify domination

over those without: stories of resistance which portray the poor to be dishonest, devious and law breakers justify a social order which aims to control them. Gupta (2001: 90) argues that while the rich see petty thieves as 'shifty Fagins' Scott presents them as a 'variety of homegrown Robin Hoods', hence romanticising resistance. At the same time Gupta argues that Scott 'believes completely' the exaggerated stories of peasants being 'always and everywhere poachers and thieves' (ibid).

However, Gupta's most important critique of this approach to resistance is that the emphasis on conceptualising everyday resistance has shifted focus away from overt, organised, large scale forms of resistance, such as agrarian movements, to clandestine or covert forms of everyday resistance. The most worrying part of this for Gupta is Scott's claim that, 'in the end, the latter agency [everyday resistance] is not just as effective as the former in terms of transforming the existing system but actually more so' (Gupta, 2001: 90).

The empirical data collected for this thesis illustrates that indeed those with very little power do resist on an everyday level: it can be assumed they always have done. This, however, is not enough to change unequal social orders or the norms which support these. Instead the recognition of 'everyday' resistance demonstrates that oppressed groups rather than being anonymous masses are genuine political subjects; historical agents, who are 'self-formed, internally autonomous actors' (Mitchell: 1990: 346). Oppressed and subordinate groups cling to whatever agency they can and seek ways to survive; to make the best of a bad situation. I argue that while everyday resistance is important and may enable both physical and emotional survival it is only the first potential step on a much larger and longer process of empowerment, which may or may not lead to organised resistance and struggles to overcome forces of oppression and subordination.

2.5 Finding Power: 'Power Over', Power To', 'Power With' And 'Power Within'

In the gender and development literature power has, in the main, been categorised into some or all of the following four types: 'power over', 'power to', 'power with' and 'power within'. This has been done primarily as a prelude to discussions in regard to empowerment.

'Power over' has been understood to be the power that is practised when an individual or group controls the actions and/or options of others. This can be through either the overt means of physical force or using more covert methods that limit a set of options being perceived (Rowlands: 1998). Kabeer (1994) is primarily concerned with covert methods of 'power over' and as such sees this type of power as being essentially about control over what comes to the decision-making agenda. Oxaal and Baden (1997) describe 'power over' as essentially a relationship based on domination and subordination which through its reliance on violence and intimidation needs constant vigilance. 'Power over' is described as finite; it is a zero sum game.

There is more divergence in describing 'power to'. Kabeer (1994) describes it as the power to make decisions and as such sees it as being closely associated with a liberal analysis. Oxaal and Baden (1997) although associating it with decision making power, also see it as describing power that can be creative and enabling. Rowlands (1995), and Nelson and Wright (1995) go further and describe 'power to' as generative. They see it taking form as a type of leadership in which there is the ability to stimulate others to realise their own capacity, knowledge and possibilities.

Both 'power with' and 'power within' are also understood by Wieringa (1994) and Rowlands (1995) as generative. Wieringa (1994) argues that both 'power with' and power within' are critical and creative. 'Power with' more precisely describes people coming together and organising with common purposes or understandings to achieve common goals. Whereas 'power within' refers to the power within an individual and a recognition of how power operates in their life. Consequently, 'power within' refers to the power of an individual gained through self-awareness, self-confidence and the ability to be assertive (Oxley and Baden, 1997).

2.6 Finding Power: Empowerment

What these succinct categories of 'power over', 'power to', 'power with' and 'power within' fail to fully elucidate is the intricate and multiple ways in which power operates and yet it is through the recognition of this fragmented nature of power that the process of empowerment can be most easily understood. [5]

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[5] This is not to say that these writers do not acknowledge or discuss this Foucauldian concept of power, in fact Nelson and Wright (1995) include it as a type in its own right categorising it as a de-centred model of power.

Within this conception it is possible to see that even those who seem the least powerful have resources of power and therefore the potential to be agents of their own fates. Kabeer (1994: 224) illustrates this by stating that, 'in reality even those who appear to have very little power are still able to resist, subvert and sometimes transform the conditions of their lives'. This idea is expanded in her description of power as processual. Power as processual sees the power and potential power in everyone regardless of their status in society, those who may have very little power are able to build upon it. It is this process which is often referred to as empowerment.

The origins of contemporary theories of empowerment can be traced to two main sources. The first is Black American radicalism of the 1960s (Kabeer, 1994; Rozario, 1997). Rozario (1997) considers the example of Solomon's influential 1976 book *Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities*, in which Solomon presented the case that black communities in the US through the negative conception held of them by larger society had become crippled by powerlessness. Solomon argued that subordinated communities accepted society's valuation of them and hence made no effort to exert power. She defined empowerment as a process initiated and encouraged by a social worker who through the use of a set of activities aimed to reduce the powerlessness that had been created by society's negative valuations. Hence this approach does not fit with a postmodern conception of power since it assumes that those being helped are powerless to begin with and as Rozario (1997:45) points out it assumes that they are ignorant of the position they are in.

The second approach, that of Freire, is the one more closely linked to the conception of empowerment in development discourses. Freire preferred the term 'conscientisation' to that of empowerment. He felt empowerment was too concerned with the individual at the cost of a focus on social structures and transforming society at large. However, he did recognise the important role which empowerment of the individual has in the process of transformation:

> 'My fear in using the expression 'empowerment' is that some people might think that such
> a practice simply empowers the students.... Even when you individually feel yourself *most*
> free, if this feeling is not a *social* feeling, if you are not able to use your *recent* freedom to
> help others to be free by transforming the totality of society, then you are exercising only
> an individualistic attitude towards empowerment or freedom.' (Freire & Shor, 1987: 108-
> 110).

More recently the term empowerment has become a buzzword within mainstream development discourses and as such has lost much of its radical potential. Large-scale projects and programmes are launched with the specific aim of the empowerment of the poor and/or women. It has become widely assumed by governments, NGOs and international agencies that empowerment is the most satisfactory way of bringing about improvements in women's lives and social development (Rozario, 1997; Parpart, 2002). Empowerment has come to be held as a panacea for all social ills, from environmental degradation to low literacy rates. It is through this careless use, which is often deliberately vague or sloganeering, that the term risks losing its value, as Kabeer (1994: 224) clarifies:

> 'T]here is no consensus on the meaning of the term and it is frequently used in a way that
> robs it of any political meaning, sometimes as no more that a substitute word for integration
> or participation in processes whose main parameters have already been set elsewhere.'

Since not all definitions or understandings agree on what the process of empowerment entails there can be no consensus on how to go about implementing a process of empowerment.

However, there is a general consensus that empowerment involves certain people acquiring more power over their lives. Rowlands (1995: 102) defines empowerment as people becoming aware of their own interests and gaining access to intangible decision making processes. She describes empowerment as a process whereby a person becomes aware of power dynamics and develops the skills and capacities to gain control of their life. In this context Rowlands emphasises the importance of attaining a sense of self and self-confidence and of overcoming internalised oppression, what Olawoye (1999: 11) refers to as 'psychological empowerment', and gaining the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship. She also relates it to decision-making, describing it as a process whereby a person perceives themselves as being able and entitled to occupy decision-making spaces. Rowlands sees the process of empowerment as being one that moves from insight to action.

Wierenga (1994: 883) describes three stages in the process of empowerment: exposing the oppressive and coercive nature of existing power dynamics, critically challenging existing power hierarchies and creatively constructing different social relations. As

such empowerment is seen as both a 'process and the result of that process' (Batliwala, 1994: 130).

Kabeer (1999: 437) theorises choice as being at the heart of empowerment, *'choice necessarily implies the possibility of alternatives,* the ability to have chosen otherwise' (her emphasis). She makes a distinction between first- and second-order choices. First-order choices she defines as the strategic life choices people make, such as livelihood, whether to marry or not and whether to have children or not. Second-order choices may be important but do not define the parameters of a persons life. As such Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the ability to make choices which had previously been denied. She outlines resources and agency as necessary to achieve empowerment. Resources are the pre-conditions for a process of empowerment. These include not only material resources, but also social relationships and a persons status the ability to control resources and define priorities. Agency Kabeer (1999: 438) defines as the 'ability to define ones goals and act upon them'. As discussed above decision making power is the most commonly recognised aspect of a persons ability to exercise power or agency. However, Kabeer also includes the less overt understandings of resistance, subversion, bargaining, negotiation and so on and so forth. She sees a persons sense of agency as related to 'power within', 'power to' and 'power over', as such agency can be used both positively and negatively. Resources and agency are what Sen (1992: 4- 5) refers to as capabilities:

> 'A person's capability to achieve functionings that he or she has reason to value… functionings included can vary from most elementary ones, such as being well-nourished, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, etc., to quite complex and sophisticated achievements, such as having self-respect, being able to take part in the life of the community, and so on'

Most of the literature agrees that empowerment should be a 'bottom-up' process whereby people develop and voice their needs and interest, without them being pre-defined, or imposed from above, by planners or other social scientists' (Oxaal and Baden, 1997: 6). The skills and abilities necessary in order to voice one's needs have become central to the process of empowerment, as Cheater (1999: 4) argues:

> 'The term 'empowerment' as used in the 1990s seems above all to be about being vocal, having a right to 'voice'.'

Lazreg (2002: 127) points to the dangers inherent in this focus on voice or more precisely on giving women voice, the idea that 'Third World women speak so that 'Western' women-qua-"developed" may speak to one another about 'them'.

James (1999: 14) argues that power in development discourse has come to mean to have a place or to have a voice. This she interprets as being represented within the management or administrative system of an organisation. As such, the emphasis on empowerment through acquiring voice shifts the focus away from the very real need of the poor for power over resources both external and internal to themselves. Chapter Five of this thesis provides an analysis of the way in which having voice; being able to speak is seen as representative of an increase in power for women. Women's voices take on a particular importance in the Rajasthani context where certain women's voices in certain places are literally forbidden.

Karl (1995) using the work of Young (1993) sought to raise awareness of the potential consequences of an over-emphasis on the use of the term empowerment. Karl argues that the use of the term made it possible for certain players in development policy to relate empowerment to neo-liberal thinking which promotes the idea of individual entrepreneurial activities being unleashed by the 'correct' mainstream policies:

> 'The term echoes the general emphasis within the mainstream on unleashing the capacity of
> individuals to be more entrepreneurial, more self reliant. It is closely allied to the current
> emphasis on individualistic values: people 'empowering themselves' by pulling themselves
> up by their bootstraps.' (Young, 1993 cited in Karl 1995: 108)

Both Cheater (1999) and James (1999) draw attention to these strands running through empowerment as an approach to development. They discuss how the links between empowerment and neo-liberal politics, have been incorporated into a philosophy of rolling back the state; taking power from the state and giving it to the people. This questioning of central planning and the role of the state has in turn led to national governments, donor governments and funding agencies embracing NGOs as partners and/or in devolving programme responsibility to NGOs. The power dynamics which operate between these different actors in development practice are discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

In a similar vein, to those who criticise postmodern thought for its lack of attention to over-arching and exploitative power dynamics in societies, Cheater (1999: 6) argues that this lack of attention can also be found within empowerment discourse:

> '[T]he very discourse of empowerment itself, particularly but not only in the global context of Third World inequality and development, may obscure the 'real' or hegemonic relations of power linking states, developers and empowerers to poor people lacking resources... and thereby render the already vulnerable even less capable of defending their self identified interests.'

In the main the empowerment discourse is concerned with only certain aspects of power. The assumed although often not stated aim of empowerment is not for a group of people to gain power over another group. Likewise, the notion of empowerment often shies away from any idea of conflict , particularly in the arena of power dynamics between genders. Consequently, within the literature there seems to be some anxiety about whether men become disempowered as women become empowered. Many writers are keen to stress that as women become empowered this will not lead to any lessening of power for men, as these quotes demonstrate:

> 'Some feminist writers on power have challenged the idea that power must necessarily involve domination by some, and obedience or oppression of others. Men would also benefit from the results of women's empowerment with the chance to live in a more equitable society and explore new roles.' (Oxaal and Baden, 1997: 2)
>
> and
>
> '[I]t seeks to identify power less in terms of domination over others (with its implicit assumption that a gain for women implies a loss for men).' (Moser, 1993: 74)

There seems to be an assumption here that men's privileged position in most societies does not benefit them and therefore if they lose this privileged status they will not lose any privileges. Saying that women's empowerment does not seek to reverse gender hierarchies in favour of women is not the same as saying that men have nothing to lose through women becoming empowered. Recognising that men will lose out in some ways as women become empowered does not deny that they also have gains to make from this process.

Batliwala (1994: 130) argues this perspective stating that since poor men are often almost as powerless as poor women, in terms of access to resources, poor men often support processes of empowerment for women which bring resources into their families

and communities, or that challenge structures of inequality which have disadvantaged both genders. It is when empowerment processes challenge male power in the public sphere or confront the power of men in the family that resistance occurs. This is a theme which is explored further principally in Chapter Four of this thesis. Women's empowerment must necessarily challenge male privilege and as such this will inevitably lead to a lessening of male power:

> 'Men in communities where such changes have already occurred no longer have control over women's bodies, sexuality, or mobility; they cannot abdicate responsibility for household-work and child care, nor physically abuse or violate women with impunity; they cannot (as is the case in South Asia at present) abandon or divorce their wives without providing maintenance, or commit bigamy or polygamy, or make unilateral decisions that affect the whole family. Clearly then women's empowerment does mean the loss of the privileged position that patriarchy allotted to men.' (ibid: 131)

Batliwala (1994) does, however, acknowledge that women's empowerment can often liberate men, in that men will also be freed from expectations of prescribed masculinity, which limit their self-expression and personal development. Chapter Five illustrates how NGO workers were always keen to stress that women's empowerment and participation would not cause any conflict between genders particularly within the family context.

At this point it is necessary to state the obvious but often neglected point that women do not always organise to encourage a more just society. This is clearly illustrated, for the Indian case, by women's participation in *Hindutva* (Hindu fundamentalist movement), discussed in the work of Chhachhi (1989; 1991), Mazumdar (1995), Sarkar and Butalia (1995). Women participate in movements to reinforce fundamentalist religious beliefs and other extremist right-wing political activities as well as taking part in struggles to counteract such movements. Considering fundamentalist movements also demonstrates how individual women may feel a sense of personal fulfilment and empowerment at the same time as contributing to discourses and reinforcing ideologies which are detrimental to the vast majority of women (Wieringa, 1994).

These extreme examples reveal the necessity of making a distinction between individual and group empowerment, described here as 'empowerment as a woman'. To be 'empowered as a woman' involves an awareness of one's status as a woman and gender dynamics in a particular society; to have a feminist consciousness. Having a feminist

consciousness would mean not supporting social structures that subordinate or disempower other women. In some cases this will be played out by directly struggling against such structures, this may be within the context of one's own household, family or community or on wider issues within society.

'Empowerment as an individual', on the other hand, entails gaining power over one's own life, but would not necessarily incorporate any notion of social change or concern for women as a group. It could, but would not necessarily, encompass gaining power over others, furthering one's own self-interest, possibly but not necessarily, at the expense of others. While making this distinction between two types of empowerment I also recognise that the actions of an individual may incorporate both types of empowerment. For instance, a woman who achieves a leadership role may have no explicit inclination towards bettering the position of women in society. However, through her success she may become a role model for other women and be breaking many social taboos based on gender divisions. Alternatively women struggle for an improvement in women's lives in general may well also empower themselves as individuals.

Understandings of empowerment within development discourse have, however, in the main moved away from individualistic approaches to ones whereby the very concept of empowerment itself implies participation in collective action of some type. It has become widely assumed that not only is empowerment dependent upon community organising it is a necessary consequence of participation in communal activities (Dawson 1998). The first stage in most projects and programmes that aim to empower women is to bring a group of women together or to encourage women to participate in existing development programmes. Lahrir-Dutt and Samanta, (2002: 143) point to the dangers inherent in the assumption that participation equals empowerment in regard to looking at women's participation in Panchayati Raj:

> 'If 'empowerment' is used in a rather restricted way, then the PR [Panchayati Raj] has somewhat succeeded in empowering rural women by ensuring their participation in the local institutions.'

2.7 Finding Power: Empowerment And Participation

Following on from above, it is often assumed that the best way to achieve the empowerment of marginalised groups is through collective organising and group work. Consequently, it is very closely linked with strategies of participation. Participation is seen as the key route for a process of empowerment to take place and an essential tool in that process. Indeed PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) has come to be seen as an effective tool for instituting women's empowerment (Parpart, 2002: 46). As with empowerment, participation has become a buzzword in development discourses since the late 1980s and, like empowerment, it has lost much of its radical association and potential. Instead it has become subsumed within mainstream development discourse. The consequences of which are described by Mosse (2001: 17):

> '[P]rominant in present-day discourse are such pragmatic policy interests as 'greater productivity at lower cost', efficient mechanisms for service delivery, or reduced recurrent and maintenance costs. Under the influence of both international donors and domestic policy shifts towards local resource management and cost recovery, participatory planning techniques are now incorporated into the routines of public sector implementation agencies.'

Cooke and Kothari (2001: 3) refer to this process as the 'inexorable spread of participation in development', from NGOs to public sector and development bureaucracies. This has been justified in terms of making people central to development, sustainability and empowerment as a goal in itself.

A description of participatory techniques and methods or programmes and projects which have employed them is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, the discussion focuses on some of the central concepts which underline participatory methodologies; the discourses and politics which inform participation.

Cooke and Kothari (2001) divide critiques of participatory strategies into two types. First, those which are critical of particular techniques and methods within the participatory approach. Since one of the tenants of participation is that it should be reflexive and continually evolving these criticisms do not address participation per se but instead can be seen as an integral part of the process. The second critique of participation ideology is that which scrutinises the theoretical, political and conceptual limitations of participation as an overall strategy for development. It is this second critique which is of relevance to this thesis.

Chambers is recognised as the most important protagonist of participatory methodologies in rural development. The titles of his books, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983) and *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (1997), are revealing in themselves in that they point to both the importance placed on dichotomies and the argued for reversal of these dichotomies through participatory techniques and methods.

Chambers' argument for the adoption of participatory methods is reliant upon analogous dichotomies: uppers/lowers, outsiders/insiders, urban/rural powerful/powerless, rich/poor and so forth. The dichotomies of outsider/insider and urban/rural are two of the most prominent. In the first chapter of *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* a long list is given of who the outsiders are, this includes: technical personnel, aid agency staff, voluntary agency professionals, academics and such like. Perhaps this is done as the assumed audience of the book are 'outsiders' and so they need to be described in order that the reader can identify her/himself within the dichotomy. Contrary to this there is no such list of who constitutes the 'insiders' instead they are loosely described as the rural poor. In doing this, even if only on a descriptive level, the rural poor instantly become homogenised. The rural poor are then essentialised against an elite and they are an 'imagined community'[6], seen to have a consensus on their own needs and interests, which serves to hide power differentials and differing needs and preferences among the groups who are supposed to be the focus of participatory development methodologies.

Likewise, the rural areas are described in relation to their distance from an urban centre or a 'good road'. In this dichotomy the further away from the urban centre the poor are, the poorer and more excluded they purportedly are. The urban area therefore becomes the central point with rural areas and rural poverty being measured against it. However, from the perspective of the 'rural poor' their village is the centre that they look out from, with other villages, towns, cities and roads being thought of in relation to where they are.

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[6] I deliberately use Benedict Anderson's (1983) phrase even though the idea of a nation being a 'imagined community' has many differences to the context in which I am using it. However, the essential idea that the deep inequalities and exploitation that exist are overlooked in order to construct a uniform whole which serves certain purposes is pertinent in this context as well.

This urban/rural dichotomy is constructed around ideas of remoteness. The more remote an area is the more unseen and ignored it is. Chambers (1983) presents us with the excuse of 'out of sight out of mind'. If the starving child could be seen and heard by 'outsiders' more would be done. This implies that urban based 'outsiders' do not come into contact with poverty on a daily basis. However, not only is there a large amount of poverty in the cities of the Third World but much of this poverty is populated by the 'rural poor',[7] who often eke out an existence providing services to the middle classes and elites. In South Asian cities particularly it is impossible to not see the 'urban/once rural poor'. The first hour of most train journeys out of India's cities travel through the slums where many of the 'urban/once rural poor' live. However, in Chambers' rural/urban dichotomy the contact between the urban outsider and the rural poor only takes place in the context of the remote villages of the rural poor. The mobility of the rural poor and their survival strategies are overlooked. This interaction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' which is dependent upon the poor's mobility is virtually ignored. Chambers does acknowledge rural to urban migration in terms of skilled and educated rural people moving but leaves it un-analysed, since it disrupts these simple dichotomies.

Unlike the gender and empowerment literature where there is much anxiety over any reversal of power, from men to women, Chambers' (1983, 1997: 106) work 'embodies a philosophy of reversals'.

> 'PRA seeks to empower lowers – women, minorities, the poor, the weak and the vulnerable
> – and to make power reversals real.'

The emphasis is on a transfer of power from one side of these analogous dichotomies to the other.

Similarly, whereas the gender and development literature implies that the responsibility for changing gender dynamics rests with women, who are defined as 'lowers', in Chambers' typography, in the participatory development discourse the responsibility for the empowerment of 'lowers' rests with those who are defined as 'uppers' or 'outsiders'. The outsider is responsible for relinquishing power, through techniques such as listening and learning. Kapoor (2002) argues that this emphasis on a voluntary act of relinquishing power on the part of 'uppers' is because Chambers wants to avoid

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[7] By rural poor here I mean either those people who have migrated to the cities from the rural areas or whose parents migrated and maintain links to their villages.

conflict at all costs. Perhaps the same could be said of those who ignore or deny that men will not loose out as women become empowered.

The emphasis is then on the 'outsider' or 'upper' to act in order to initiate change:

> 'Putting the first last is harder. For it means that those who are powerful have to step down,
> sit, listen, and learn from and empower those who are weak and last.' (Chambers, 1997: 2)

The role of the 'insider' or 'lower' is simply to respond in the correct 'participatory' manner, or what Kothari (2001) refers to as the 'performance of participation'. Not only is change dependent on the action of 'uppers' but as Kapoor (2002: 111) points out this should be individual actions based on personal choice and behavioural change:

> 'What is puzzling about Chambers' position is that he takes great pains to emphasise PRA's
> group and participatory orientation, yet when it comes to issues of power he ends up
> focusing on individual change.'

The most commonly stressed of these behavioural changes which are expected of the 'outsider' is to listen and learn from the rural poor; to listen to and learn 'local' or 'community' knowledge. In fact, the incorporation of 'local' knowledge into project planning is seen as a central facet of participatory development, with some believing this to be the most important aspect of participation. It is seen as a challenge to the power of traditional development discourses and the professionalism of 'uppers'.

The problem identified by much of the literature which questions the effectiveness of participation is that 'local knowledge' has become both essentialised and romanticised, when, as explored previously, knowledge is in fact an accumulation of social norms and practices that are embedded in social relations. Local knowledge through participatory discourses has become seen as 'a fixed commodity the people intrinsically have and own' (Kothari, 2001: 141). This failure to problematise local knowledge consequently portrays it as if it is a benign natural given. It has become seen as pure and truthful, as untouched and uncontaminated by social, cultural and political forces that exist within not only the local arena but also within national and global forces which interact with the 'local community'.

Both Kapoor (2002) and Mohan and Stokke (2000) draw attention to the inherent exclusions which are produced when local knowledge is essentialised. Mohan and Stokke are then specific as to what these exclusions might be and what is lost through them:

'The corollary is that, by valorising the local in this way and being self-critical of our colonising knowledge, 'we' behave as if we do not have anything to offer. The populist line treats all knowledge from 'the West' as tainted, and prevents genuine dialogue and learning. In this spatio-political schema the 'local' and the 'non-local' are treated as 'discrete entities', entirely separable from each other and space.' (ibid: 254)

'Alternative development' discourses valorise and romanticise local knowledge, assuming this knowledge to be homogeneous and in opposition to other knowledges from outside. However, local knowledge in not only constructed by existing factors within the locality and beyond it but also by the projects and programmes which are attempting participatory development. The 'community's knowledge' which is produced and represented as part of the planning process of participatory programmes and projects also 'reflects the social relationships that planning systems entail' (Mosse, 2001:17). Kothari (2001) explains how the tools and techniques of, in particular, rapid rural appraisal (a commonly used participatory technique used in the initial planning process of participatory projects) takes out the complications from people's everyday lived reality. The objective of these techniques is for the recipients of development to explain their lives in simplified ways which are easy for the development practitioner to understand. Therefore, what is usual and ordinary is seen and anything which may complicate this is left out.

'[P]articipatory techniques often requires the taking out of anything complicated, making people's lives and their social interactions linear and sterile as they fit into charts, diagrams and tables and conform to the boundaries and limitations of the methodological tools.' (Kothari, 2001: 147)

What is often presented then by the 'community' through participatory methodologies is the community's official view of itself tempered by what the community believes the agency wants to hear in order to get what they think they can get from the agency. Mosse (2001) argues that what people say they want or need from a project is influenced by what people themselves perceive the project is doing there, based on the norms of development which they too have absorbed. The recipients of development no more live in a vacuum which is untouched by development discourse and practice than do development professionals. Something which is made clear in Chapters Four and Seven of this thesis.

White (1996) illustrates this saying when 'the people' are asked what they want often very conventional answers are given. Women ask for sewing machines which may reflect the gender-determined division of labour but also draw on what people have seen or perceived of development projects and what they are expected to look like. Mosse (2001) refers to this as local collusion in planning processes. How people construct their own needs is shaped by what they feel the agency is able to give. The recipients of development, it can then be argued, acquire a new planning knowledge and learn how to manipulate it.

Likewise, projects have their own needs. Field staff are accepted into villages based on the premise that they are there to give and provide benefits. Therefore, they are constrained to initiate activities and programmes which conform to this agenda. This combined with the over simplification of the reality of people's lives leads to a situation whereby 'local knowledge becomes compatible with bureaucratic planning' (ibid: 32).

Mosse (2001) also points to two other phenomena which contribute to this situation. First, the direct manipulation of people's planning by project agents. Project facilitators are not passive actors in the reiteration of local knowledge. They decide what to record from a participatory planning exercise and will therefore frequently record that which reflects and endorses the projects broad objectives. Second, since rural knowledge in the participatory model is based on a fallacy of consensual village interests it is easy for external interests to be represented as local needs and dominant interests as community interests.

Further to this 'community knowledge' is shaped by local relations of power. While local knowledge is highly differentiated according to who is producing it and in terms of different ways of knowing, this is concealed by participation. Since participatory events are public arenas local authority figures and outsiders are present and naturally there is a lot at stake in defining needs, programme activities and who the target group will be.

Both Kapoor (2002) and Kothari (2001) criticise participatory discourses for their under-theorisation and misunderstanding of power. In particular they argue that by not taking account of Foucault's understanding of the operationalisation of power and the

inter-relationship between power and the construction of knowledge, participation has ignored important ways in which power works and the inherent dangers in this:

> 'By not recognising that knowledge is produced out of power relations in society and through practitioners' acceptance of 'local knowledge' as some kind of objective truth, participatory methodologies are in danger of reifying these inequalities and of affirming the agenda of elites and other more powerful actors.' (Kothari, 2001: 145)

Power hierarchies will in fact be created and/or re-inforced by the project. Those who are in a position to more fully participate or who fulfil expectations of behaviour may be listened to more. Similarly, new power hierarchies may be created by the project itself as leaders in the participatory process are sought and those who are better able to perform the tasks of participation are raised to this level.

The very exercise of seeking a consensus risks simplifying diversity and using coercion. Representing the community as homogenous may facilitate certain results and solutions but in doing this it will necessarily silence or even exclude particular voices (Kapoor, 2002). Consequently, unless the idea of the community is deconstructed the consensus building of participation can serve to reinforce dominant discourses. Kapoor does acknowledge that participatory discourses recognise multiple realities and local diversity, but what is not clarified is when differences are reconciled, as they must be in a search for consensus. Is this due to erasure and repression or acceptable give and take?

In the participatory world of analogous dichotomies, power is described as something that is either possessed or not: the power of the 'haves' and the powerlessness of the 'have nots'. This simplification of how power works does not, by implication, recognise the 'have nots' as agents in their own lives, with the potential to build on their power resources. Instead it shows them to be only able to exert this power when an outsider comes along who through participation and the reversal of power hierarchies will imbue them with the power to resist and take control of their lives. This is only seen to be achievable through the 'correct' administering of development projects.

A number of commentators have pointed out that the recipients of participatory programmes and projects do not simply accept intervening participatory methodologies. Instead they manipulate them to their best advantage, what could be called a covert

strategy of resistance. They learn the performance of participation and use it in their best interests. Individuals and groups choose what information they will conceal or choose to disclose in order to gain some control of the participatory process (Kothari, 2001).

More overt forms of resistance to participation may come in the form of refusing to participate altogether. James (1999) describes a situation where refugee camp agency workers complained that the community were not participating or understanding the meaning of participation, when what was actually happening was that they were refusing to work for free, whilst the local population were being paid, even if they were getting food rations. As James (1999: 25) asks:

> 'What is the use of 'participation' that means working without wages, or handing over the money you have collected in some income-generating project to an official, or borrowing money from him that you can not repay and are blamed for losing? Of a concept of 'self-sufficiency', when you have not been allocated anywhere near a tenth of the land you would require for this?'

A further criticism of the participation discourse which has also been levelled at both postmodernist theories and empowerment discourse is the overlooking of global structures of inequality. The use of participation by actors in institutions, with the emphasis on the regulatory power of civil society, decentralisation, stake holders and local governance has served to overemphasise the local and consequently disregard forces of exploitation that operate at both national and global levels. Hintjens (1999) questions the move away from firstly making the state accountable and secondly from a class based analysis. She argues that the state has been 'let off of the hook' as more and more importance is placed on citizens both individually and collectively providing for themselves regardless of their poverty or disadvantage. She questions why at a time when inequality is rife and global capitalism is triumphing there has been a move away from a class based analysis.

Hitjens (1999) also questions the lack of focus on tangible material goals as intangible ones, such as social transformation and capacity building, become more and more important in development practice and discourse. This focus in development programmes on intangible goals has gradually come to override the practical and material concerns of everyday life – 'goats and water'. She states that the aim of development has always been about improving people's lives in material terms and if

this is no longer the aim it is difficult to see what the intervention is about. What is then implied in the following quote is the fear that this concentration on intangible goals is turning attention away from the macro policies and inequalities which serve to maintain vast amounts of poverty and deprivation:

> 'It seems only a matter of time before some agency incorporates 'the right to dream' into their conditions for funding of project proposals! This would require the recruitment of a whole new category of experts on 'dreaming in development', and would not conflict with the continuation of macro-economic free-market policies.' (ibid: 385)

Hitjens' cynicism is supported by the fact that, as she says, during the 1990s a checklist has developed within major NGOs, government agencies and multilateral institutions to ensure that interventions are people-centre, rights-based, and locally sustainable and yet ironically macro-economic policies have not changed substantially since the late 1970s. James (1999) is also concerned with how the fashion for community participation and empowerment has detracted attention from external structures of land holding, the subsistence economy and political and military interventions which have shaped and continue to shape the social life of a region. The recognition that even the poorest and most exploited individual has some ability to resist their conditions and the potential to become empowered should not lead to the ignoring of often overwhelming structures of oppression and exploitation that exist within social systems.

2.8 Finding Power: Power Dynamics in the Family and Household

Gender dynamics are the primary area for analysis in this thesis and the household is widely recognised to be the primary site for the enactment of gendered power and the reproduction of gendered identities. Closely related to this is the argument that 'while empowering women requires fundamental changes at many levels of society, arguably the most complex and elusive transformation may be in the relations within the family and household' (Sen *et al* 1994: 8). Most of the literature concerned with gender dynamics in this context uses the term household. However, I am concerned with the influence of family power more widely and as such invariably use the term family. Even when family members are not living within the same household, family members living separately to a particular household have a huge impact and influence on the dynamics between the members of that household and on the lives of individual household members, especially in the Indian context. This is clearly demonstrated in Chapters Three and Six.

A household has been described as a group of people who co-reside for certain purposes such as, consumption, reproduction, socialisation, production and investment (Chant, 1991; Agarwal, 1997). A family is based on relationships of biology, adoption and marital ties. In the context of my fieldwork all households were made up of solely family members. As such the household would make for a smaller unit of analysis than the one necessary for this thesis. Nevertheless concepts and ideas regarding household power are also appropriate for understanding and describing power relationships across the wider family.

One of the earliest approaches to the household was the unitary approach or New Household Economics approach, initially conceptualised by Becker (1981; 1985). This approach treats the household as if it were an entirely co-operative unit which acts to maximise the joint utility of all its members, 'individual self interests combine seamlessly into family self-interest' (Jacobsen, 1994: 16). The joint utility of the household requires that the tastes and preferences of individuals be aggregated. This aggregation is to be achieved under the dictate of an altruistic household head whom Becker (1981: 173) implied would be male, 'to distinguish the altruist from the beneficiary, I use the masculine pronoun for the altruist and the feminine pronoun for the beneficiary'. Marxist paradigms of the household also conformed to the unitary model. Folbre (1988) explains that despite Marxist conceptualisations not actually using the term altruism they implicitly assume that altruism governs family life. This unitary model assumes that the household that is shaped by equality and harmony.

The unitary model has been widely criticised by scholars concerned with gender relations and inequity within the family, who have 'discredited the idea that households are unitary entities operating on altruistic principles and replaced this with the notion that they are arenas of competing claims, rights, power, interests and resources' (Chant, 2003a: 19). Alternative conceptualisations have been formulated, which recognise conflicts of interests within the household and the reality that both gender and age determine differing access to resources (e.g. Folbre, 1988, 1994; Guyer and Peters, 1987; Hartmann, 1981; Moore, 1988, 1994; Whitehead, 1981).

The unitary model despite its many inaccuracies and misconceptions is still widely used by policy makers. First, because poverty levels are easier to measure when the

household is left as a unitary whole, rather than taking in to account differentials of poverty among household members (Chant, 2003a). Second, it allows resources and benefits to be directed to a household head under the assumption that such benefits would be realised by the entire household equally (Dwyer and Bruce, 1988).

Most of these alternative paradigms of the household broadly fit within a bargaining model of household relations. The most comprehensive and useful among these is Sen's (1990) model of 'cooperative conflicts'. In this model members bargain, with different levels of power, over resources. Sen (1990) raises three pertinent points in regard to a persons bargaining position and shows how gender roles and relations affect this position; first, a persons fall back position; their vulnerability if the unit breaks down; second, a person's perceived interest and third, their perceived contribution to the household. If a person's perceived interest does not relate to their own well-being or the perceived value of their contributions to the household is less than their actual contribution, such a person will have less power over decision making, time allocation and control over and claim to resources.

Sen's (1990) model of power dynamics at the household level is dependent on the conception of power as something which shapes the wants, needs and preferences of actors in maintaining a social order even if it may in fact maintain them in a subordinate position. As such earlier arguments in this chapter regarding false consciousness and internalised oppression are of relevance to understanding the operation of power and the behaviour of actors within the domains of the family and household.

This is an argument which Kandiyoti (1998) returns to in her critique of her earlier work, *Bargaining with Patriarchy* (1988). She discusses the difficulties of either accepting the notion of false consciousness or accepting the other extreme of the subordinate yet autonomous, self-determining individual who is 'able to see through the mystificatory discourses of the dominant' (Kandiyoti, 1998: 146-7). She does not fully resolve this argument but instead concludes by saying that perhaps it is not possible to resolve it:

> '[G]ender may or may not be a salient category for an explanation of contestation and resistance, the self-determining, autonomous individual may or may not be a useful point for analysis, 'women' may or may not emerge as a social category around which an articulation of interest takes place and resisting subjects may be both rational actors and unable to think beyond the 'naturalised' givens of their communities.' (ibid: 147)

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Both Kabeer (1994) and Agarwal (1997) draw attention to the relationship between gender dynamics outside the household and intra-household bargaining. Agarwal demonstrates how the household, the market, the community and state are all arenas where gender is constituted and contested. She makes the case for an analysis that looks at the interaction of gendered bargaining power as it is simultaneously constructed and reconstituted across these different arenas. This conception of gendered power in one site influencing gender dynamics in another is crucial to the analysis of how women's political participation effects gender relations in the context of the family and local community.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter began by considering the different ways in which power has been conceptualised. It demonstrated how both postmodernist conceptualisation of power and the resistance literature, which has been influenced by these understandings, offers important insights as to how power is negotiated. However, it also pointed to the dangers inherent in these conceptions of power. First, over-arching structures of domination and exploitation can be ignored and second, the emphasis on 'everyday resistance' can shift focus away from organised large scale forms of resistance. I conclude that in order to understand how power operates and is negotiated in a given community or society it is necessary to take into account many of the different ways in which power has been conceptualised.

This Chapter was also concerned with the ways in which empowerment has been conceptualised and how the term is used. While the chapter discussed debates around the term and drew attention to the many different ways it has been and continues to be used I argue that it is still a useful term and the very flexibility it contains serves to illustrate the complex nature of negotiating and changing structures and dynamics of power.

The discussion on community participation within development thought and practice highlighted the dangers of dichotomies which either represent the rural poor and women in post-colonial regions as either a powerless other or romanticise them as having pure knowledges unaffected by wider historical and social forces. Both these dichotomies

most usually fail to elucidate the inequities existing within these communities and groups.

Finally the chapter has raised issues as to what 'truth' is and how internalised social norms and the interdependence between truth and knowledge not only affect how we conceptualise the operation of power within different contexts, but also affects the research process itself.

CHAPTER THREE
GENDER, GENERATION AND PLACE

'From your foot to your head we teach you everything. If we say a hundred things then you understand one thing'[1]

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes how gender, generation and place intersect to determine a woman's status and position. In doing so it presents a picture of the lives of the people who have informed my research. The chapter is structured in the chronological order of a life cycle, with a focus on the changing roles, relationships and status of women. The focus is predominantly on the experiences and attitudes of girls and women. This is a limitation of the chapter since any study of gender can only be enhanced by also examining the lives and attitudes of men and boys. The reason for this is that in a highly gender stratified and sex segregated society it was necessary to choose whether to spend time with women or men and most usually I chose women or this was chosen for me. Access to women was inevitably far easier, although being seen as foreign and different I was not precluded access to men's spaces in the main. The analysis in following chapters addresses the attitudes and opinions of men since these are based more on interview material than this one, for which the information was gained predominantly from observation and informal conversations.

In the main this chapter relies on data collected in rural areas and among poor women. However, most of the urban-based women who informed my study had grown up in villages. Furthermore, the norms of behaviour described are to varying degrees, depending on individual, family and community identities, similar in both Bikaneri villages and Bikaner town itself. Similarly, while caste, religion and economic status are major structural stratifiers which create differences in the way people live their lives and are viewed by themselves and others, many of the social practices and norms of behaviour discussed are common across different castes and religious communities in the Bikaneri context.

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[1] Said to me by Meena *bai* (all names have been changed throughout the thesis) who was a *mahila sangathan* member, *a dai* (traditional midwife), mother to nine children, grandmother to ten, who had been a *ward-panch* during the previous session.

There are two reasons for providing this presentation of women's lives in Bikaner district. The first is to contextualise the case study material in the proceeding chapters in order that it can be visualised and understood.

The second is to demonstrate how gender, generation and place continually and simultaneously interact throughout a woman's life to construct her status at a given moment and, as such, her identity, agency and access to resources.[2] This chapter looks beyond social structures most commonly recognised to construct and define a person's identity.[3] I argue that individual identity and status are determined not only by the most obvious factors of religion, caste, economic position and gender but also by position in the family, the structure of both natal and conjugal family, fictive-kin[4] relationships within a village as well as personal characteristics and experiences. Identity and status are not fixed but change over time and according to place. A woman's status not only changes as she moves from the position of daughter to young wife and daughter-in-law, to one of mother and eventually mother-in-law, but is also continually changing as a woman moves between her *pihar* (natal) and *sasural* (conjugal) village.[5] Consequently, I argue that Rajasthani women are both mobile and continually adapting to changing identities and expectations.

Not only do generation and place serve to create gender differences between men and women but also construct hierarchies of power between women. Chapter Seven draws on this material to argue that while caste and class are widely recognised to be inhibiting factors for women's solidarity, familial and generational positions can be similarly divisive.

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[2] I take resources to mean more than simply access to material resources such as food, clothing and health care and include less tangible resources such as time, information, and freedom from physical and emotional pain.

[3] For discussions on gender and identity construction please see Butler, (1992); Hasan (1994); Marchand and Parpart (eds.) (1995: Introduction and Part III); Papanek, (1994) and Mufti and Shohat (1997).

[4] Fictive-kinship is used to denote artificial kinship adoption and construction rather than that which is consanguineous. Lambert (1997) outlines and makes distinctions between different types of artificial kinship. She make the distinction between formalised ritual kinship, for example the practice of *rhuki* whereby a woman makes a man her brother. Village kinship, for example, all girls born in a village are considered to be the daughter, brother sister etc. of all of members of that village and thirdly that of courtesy kinship. In most encounters in Rajasthan, particularly in the rural areas, people will call each other by appropriate kinship names. For example the children of women who I knew well would call me (*mosi*) mother's sister.

[5] I use the Hindi words *pihar* and *sasural* rather than their English translation, since so much of what is meant by *pihar* and *sasural* is not captured in their translation to English, as the content of this chapter makes clear.

3.1.1 Subjectivity, Partiality And Ethnography

The picture of people's lives presented is, of course, only a partial picture in both senses of the word. It is partial by being both incomplete and biased by my own interests, as any piece of ethnography or research always is. These issues of representation and subjectivity have been discussed at length elsewhere[6] and I do not dwell on them here. However, as and when necessary, my subjectivity, the differing ways in which I was perceived and understood, as well as factors external to subjective interaction, which influenced what people chose to reveal to me and how I chose to interpret this, are discussed where relevant in this chapter and the rest of the thesis.

The information people chose to share with me depended upon perceptions of who I was, what my motivations were and what people felt they would lose or gain by speaking to me. Naturally over time as much as the way I perceived and understood different people changed so their perceptions and understandings of me changed. As these dynamics changed so did the stories I was told and the information that was revealed to me. Early interactions frequently produced more straightforward information based on idealised norms of behaviour. In contrast, later interactions with the same people produced more complicated stories revealing many nuances and contradictions. Those that I gained most knowledge and insight from, regarding everyday life, were the families who I stayed with in the villages where I worked and the women and their families whom I was able to develop relatively close relationships with.[7] These people could not have been located by any sampling method. Often they were a self-selecting group because they were those willing to trust me early on in the research process and as such teach, guide and share their time and homes with me.

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[6] For example please see Chatterjee (2002); Goetz (1991); Mohanty, (1991); Narayan (1997) and the collection of papers edited by Bell, Caplan and Karim (1993)

[7] The three families I stayed with on a regular basis were: a large *Meghwal* family consisting of the senior man and woman, their three married sons and their wives, two unmarried sons and two unmarried daughters. Their married daughters visited for extended stays quite often. There were four grandchildren who lived with them. Another married son and daughter-in-law lived nearby who had seven children. The head woman was also the village *dai*. In another village I stayed with a Muslim family again headed by a married couple who have four sons, only one of whom is married with two young children, his wife and one unmarried daughter. They also have a married daughter who has children, lives in Bikaner and visits occasionally. The third family I stayed with are Rajput. Most of the time the husband is away working and so living in the household are the wife her daughter and three sons, whose ages ranged from 12 – 15 years. All are unmarried. The husband's family live very close by and his mother is a regular visitor.

3.2 *Pihar* (natal village) – *Sasural* (conjugal village) Dynamic

For the majority of women there are two places of importance in their life: her *pihar* and her *sasural*. A woman's *pihar*, in the rural context is the whole of the village that she has grown up in and lives in permanently until some point after her marriage. In the urban context a girl may, after marriage, stay living in the same city in which case her *pihar* becomes synonymous with her parent's house and the immediate surrounding area. Similarly among Muslim families where exogamous marriage is not compulsory a girl is more likely to stay in the same village or area of a city after marriage. The second place is her *sasural*, the village her husband and his family live in, where she moves to at some point after marriage. I came across very few examples of women who did not live in one of these two places. They included five women who were middle-class and married into land-owning families. The women their husbands and children had moved to the city but they still maintain close links with her *sasural* village. In fact in three of these examples the woman had a seat on the *gram panchayat* in her *sasural*. Other examples included families who had migrated in search of employment or land and a family who had moved due to a dispute with the husband's brothers.

3.2.1 *Pihar* – *Sasural* Dynamic: Being A Daughter: Not Being A Son, Work And Education

A daughter's life in her *pihar* prior to marriage is relatively free of restrictions and the burden of farm and household work.[8] Two prominent interrelated factors influence her status and her relative freedom from gendered social restrictions and the burden of physical work. First, the institution of exogamous patrilocal marriage and second, the highly fluctuating and differentiated structure of the household. The discussion below regarding attitudes towards formal education for girls illustrates how both these factors impact upon girls' access to education and explores community attitudes and expectations concerning the roles and responsibilities of girls. In a similar manner an examination of people's justification for child marriages highlights how practical and ideological considerations work in tandem to encourage the continuation of a situation which is widely recognised to be detrimental.

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[8] I use two categories to describe non-waged work; farm or field work includes all work done on the land that people own and household work includes: all domestic work, i.e. cooking, cleaning, collecting water and fuel plus caring for animals. Paid work and child-care are referred to independently.

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As mentioned above, patrilocal marriage practices are the norm across all caste and religious groups and exogamy is the norm for all except the Muslim population. The expectation is, therefore that a girl will not remain a permanent resident of the village she has been born in and where her family live. Palriwala (1991: 2764) reports from her research conducted in Sikar district of Rajasthan that:

> 'It was said that a woman should not grow too attached to her natal village as she must eventually leave it. Flexibility was desirable from the start'.

3.2.1.1 Son Preference

The fact that girls marry out was virtually the only reason given for people's preference to have sons. Sons are seen to be needed for security in old age and to carry on the family as these quotes demonstrate:

> 'The boys carry our family on, they give money and the girls go to their *sasural*. The boy stays at home'. *Older Meghwal woman* [9] [10]

> 'The girls will go to their *sasural* and so you need to have a boy. Who will provide food and shelter to you and your husband, no one will help you. This is the main reason that you should have a boy. I have six sons so I am satisfied. I have six whether they give me food and shelter it depends on my destiny. Maybe, I will lose one of them maybe I will lose all of them but it gives me satisfaction that I have six boys. The girl is in her *sasural* and I am ill'. *Middle-aged Nayak woman addressing my research assistant, Monika, who has two daughters and does not want any more children.*

This quote also illustrates how despite her six sons, three daughters-in-law, a sister and female friends in the village this woman desperately missed the company of her only daughter who was intermittently living in both her *sasural* and *pihar* during the time of my fieldwork. This is perhaps something which is obvious, parents missing their daughters who move away, but is something seldom addressed in the literature. White (1997: 16-17) also points to the lack of attention paid to this dynamic. She describes a situation during her own fieldwork, in Bangladesh, of a father being close to tears and leaving his house because his family are preparing for his daughters wedding and he

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[9] I give people's caste details not because I see caste as the most important way to categorise people, but instead for the same reasons I give age and position in family, in order to provide a fuller picture of the person speaking rather than de-contextualising their words.

[10] When using the term 'young' to describe a respondent it means she/he is below the age of about thirty five, who will most likely have children usually from quite young up to possibly their early twenties and may recently have become a mother-in-law/father-in-law. When using middle-aged I am describing people between the ages of about thirty five and their late forties, who have grown up children some of whom will be married. Anyone above this age I describe as older. Often rural men and women do not know there exact ages which is why I use these more generalised terms.

cannot bare the thought of her leaving. Perhaps this is in fact another reason for wanting to have sons over daughters so as not to have to face the emotional trauma of a child leaving.

Under exceptional circumstances it could be arranged before marriage that a son-in-law would come and live in his wife's *pihar*. This is not seen as ideal since sons-in-law are not seen to be as trustworthy as sons and because it would be difficult to find a boy whose family would agree to this situation.

While others (Raheja and Gold, 1994: 78) conducting research in similar contexts in Rajasthan to me have noted dowry as a dominant reason for son preference, this was interestingly only given to me as a reason on one occasion:

> 'Everything we buy for our son's marriage comes back to us; what we buy for our daughters we lose.' *Young Meghwal woman*

Excessive dowry demands are, however, more of a phenomenon in urban areas, particularly among the Hindu middle-classes, than in rural areas and among the poor (Kishwar, 1984; Sharma, 1984; Stone and James, 1995;). One Muslim man indicated this situation to me when talking about choosing who to marry his own daughters to by stating, 'educated people demand money'. In this context educated can be read to mean middle-class and urban.

Despite the preference for sons, in the area of my research, people also wanted to have at least one daughter. The desire for boys was not at the exclusion of wanting a daughter but instead seen as more essential since long-term household survival and the continuation of the family are seen as being secured through sons and not daughters.

3.2.1.2 The Roles And Responsibilities Of Daughters

Family structure greatly influences a daughter's work burden. If she has elder brothers and in-married sisters-in-law, who undertake the household and farm work, she is relatively free from work. She would be called upon to undertake the daughter-in-law's tasks along with her own mother and possibly other daughters-in-law when either a daughter-in-law is visiting her *pihar*, has recently given birth, or is too ill too work. The antithesis of this is elder daughters in large families with no in-married sisters-in-law. These girls frequently have a very large work burden particularly during the harvesting season when they have to make a substantial contribution to both household and farm

work.[11] How isolated a child is in this work depends on whether they have other siblings around to help, the layout of the village and the location of their home. In some villages people live close together and children and adults can easily visit one another. In other villages, homes are spaced out on people's farms and consequently girls and women are far more isolated.

Poverty levels are also a major factor impacting a daughter's workload, with wealthy families being able to hire labour, particularly in regard to farm work in the villages and domestic labour in the more urbanised areas.

3.2.1.3 Gender And Decision Making Regarding Children's Education

Education is often a key route through which girls build their own social networks and gain greater mobility. Although enormous inroads in the provision and acceptance of education for girls have been made in the area, through both governmental and non-governmental programmes[12], it is still not commonplace for girls in the rural areas to attend school and certainly not above the age of eight to ten years. Education is more common for boys but still many boy children do not attend school either or only attend for very short periods of time.

Education is recognised by all in both rural and urban areas as a key route to improving women's status. Education programmes are a priority for NGO managers and fieldworkers. Education was often talked about as the panacea for all of women's problems as well as being seen as the key route to change in women's lives as this *Khati* (carpenter caste) mother of four young children told me:

> 'It's *(my life)* like my mother's. They *(my daughters)* are illiterate so they will live their lives like me.'

and on a more positive note:

> 'The changes will happen step by step. Some women have become teachers some women have become *sarpanches*, girls are getting an education.... They are learning more things

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[11] It is important to note that un-married sons, in particular, are also called on to undertake certain household tasks especially when there were no daughters in the family. The demands on boys, however, are in the main far less.

[12] For example URMUL Trust run *Balika Shivir*, residential six month education camps for girls from the rural areas. These camps are held during the dry season when there is the least work in the fields. Girls who have had none or only very limited schooling attend and are educated up to 5th standard. Most of the girls are unmarried although URMUL have managed to persuade a number of families to send their uneducated daughters-in-law. Likewise a small number of adult women have attended. Overall these camps have been extremely successful.

they have started to do more things. They will know a lot of things that we don't know because we are uneducated.' *Middle aged Jat mother of four children.*

It was recognised that the benefits of education far exceed being able to secure employment.

'Because all the women are uneducated and illiterate so they do not understand how to bargain and that type of thing. They do not understand the right prices of things so they think I should go with them and then it will be OK.' *Middle-aged Rajput woman*

This quote also illustrates how uneducated or illiterate was also taken to mean unaware and without knowledge. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

Despite the widely held opinion that education is valuable and the 'right' thing to do is to educate ones daughters, as well as sons, many children still do not attend school, or only attend sporadically. Most of the reasons given for not sending girls (and in some cases sons) to school are of a practical rather than ideological nature. However, practical difficulties are informed by gender ideologies which have created particular restrictions. For example, the segregation of space according to sex. The quotes below illustrate that a lack of <u>suitable</u> educational facilities, for girls, is a common reason given for not continuing with a daughter's education.

'The headmaster was a drunk and so all <u>good</u> girls left the school and only <u>bad</u> girls stayed.' *Middle-aged Muslim woman.*

'There is no separate school for girls.... The small girls study with the boys but not the elder girls.' *Middle-aged Meghwal woman*

'There is no woman teacher in the school... four or five times she went to attend the school but only the boys go to school.' *Young Rajput woman.*

These opinions expressed by mothers with young daughters demonstrate that a fear of damaging a girl's reputation prevented them from allowing their daughters to go to school. Similarly when further schooling is available in a large village or nearby town it is not acceptable to most people to allow girls to travel that distance alone and I would be told that there is no one to chaperone them on the journey.

It is rarely explicitly stated that educating boys was more important than girls. Urmila, however, a *Khati* (carpenter caste) woman with four young children did express this opinion giving a rational explanation:

'Because they (boys) earn money and they will give us food. Because we have the field work we are not planning for the girls education. Our boys do the carpentry work it is necessary because without education how are they able to measure and do those types of things? Girls are always in the house so it is not necessary to give any more education to them.'

Urmila's eldest daughter who at the time was ten had left school three years previously. Urmila and her husband both told me that schooling had always been difficult because during the rainy season the whole family live in their fields and so the children could never go to school at that time of year. The year that their eldest daughter stopped going to school there had been a particularly good crop (a rarity in this part of Rajasthan) and so it was necessary to keep her away from school in order to help with the extra work. All these reasons were presented as justifications for not sending their daughter to school. In spite of this it seemed that the main reason is of a more personal nature:

'Because I had problems, her father still blames me for that, he still wants her to go to school... most of the time I am ill, and when I suggested to her to go to school for five or six months she refused and said I will miss you a lot... My heart races, I want everybody with me, if my husband goes out I can't settle until he comes back my heart races... I feel anxious I want everyone with me... before my elder daughter I lost two sons and one premature baby girl so after that it started.'

This family's story encompasses many of the reasons given as to why girls do not go to school. First, going to school breaks with the social expectations surrounding girls. Second, girls are required to take over household tasks including looking after younger siblings while their mothers and fathers work in the fields, or, they themselves would be involved in farm work. Boys are also taken out of school to help with farm work or take care of the animals. Third, often the entire family relocates to their fields during the wet season and it may not be possible for the children to travel to school. Fourth, an investment in sons' education is more beneficial to the wellbeing of the entire family as 'girls go to their *sasural*'. Last, daughters are on occasion called upon to care for their mothers. Urmila's psychologically ill health was not an isolated example in this respect:

'I did get my children educated, not much but they are educated. Because my health has not been good we stopped sending her to school, we kept her at home and then afterwards we sent her to the *shiva* (girls education camp). She did up to 5th pass.' *Young Jat woman*

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This woman's health problems, like Urmila's, were psychological in nature.[13]

3.3 *Pihar – Sasural* Dynamic: Marriage and *Muklava*

It is extremely important in the Rajasthani context to make a distinction between marriage and *muklava*. Whereas marriage is the ceremonial wedding, *muklava* is the time when a girl goes to her *sasural* for the first time. Most usually if a girl is older, fourteen or fifteen, marriage and *muklava* take place at the same time. However, if a girl is still young *muklava* is usually delayed.

Although fifteen to sixteen years for girls and seventeen to twenty for boys are most usually articulated as the optimum ages for children to get married, marriages of younger children are common. Several factors contribute to this. The enormous cost of marriage ceremonies encourages people to get more than one child married at a time, particularly if sister or brother siblings are marrying sister or brother siblings. This leads to the younger siblings getting married when they are still very young children. This type of joint marriage for economic reasons is described well by a middle-aged *Nayak* mother of six sons and one daughter:

> 'When my elder sons had their marriages – marriages are so expensive that it causes a money crisis in the family and so we thought we can marry him as well (referring to her youngest son aged 12 - 13). But we do not bring our daughters-in-law now because they are small.... If we have an elder daughter-in-law then we do the marriage and *muklava* together.'

As this quote shows the age of marriage is not necessarily the most important factor impacting on the well-being of the child. Instead the age at which *muklava* takes place is of more significance. However, once a girl is married her in-laws do have a certain amount of power in calling her to their home. This may be taken advantage of when

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[13] The numbers of women in both the rural and urban Bikaner who seemed to be suffering from some form of psychological illness surprised me. Several were taking tranquillisers and several had received electric convulsive therapy (ECT). Women's mental distress is most commonly exhibited through 'hysteria'. I was told by a grandmother-in-law that the wife of her recently married son, who had been exhibiting acute signs of distress, since the marriage, was being taken to Bikaner by her mother-in-law for ECT. In another very distressing example a new young daughter-in-law had arrived at the neighbouring farm to where we were staying, about 200 kms. away. Every night for the four days we were in the village on that visit, and sometimes during the day, we could here her screaming hysterically. Feeling upset and helpless we passed by the neighbours and Monika enquired what the problem was. We were told that a particular religious ceremony had not been conducted before she left her *pihar* and now the girl was possessed. It was beyond the scope of my research to investigate discourses around or prevalence of either mental illness or its treatment. However, a very good report on the incidence of hysteria among women in Bikaner district is Kaul (1999), also see Ram (2001) for discussion of possession and hysteria in Tamil Nadu and Davar (1999, 2001) for broader discussion on women's mental health in India from a gender perspective.

there is a large amount of work to be done and consequently girls do move to their *sasural* at a younger age than their parents would like.

Getting children married is a constant source of anxiety for parents, as this quote illustrates:

> 'We think we will do her marriage whilst we are still alive: with my hand we will do her marriage. If we will not live, who will marry her? Who will be responsible for her? My father died before my first son's marriage and my mother wanted to see my eldest son's marriage that's why we did his marriage at an early age.' *Elderly Meghwal father of nine.*

This last quote also shows people's awareness of the detrimental consequences of marrying their children while still young in the way that this man attempts to justify doing so.

Combined with these issues parents who want to marry their daughters when they are older feel an enormous social pressure on them not to wait. The daughter, Indu, whose marriage the man quoted above is referring to, and her best friend, Chandini, were about twelve or thirteen at the time of my fieldwork. They were both continuing with their education. There was considerable pressure on their families to get them married. They were among the eldest girls in the village who were not engaged. Chandini's elder married sister explained that no one in her family wanted Chandini to get married until she was older, but the villagers were starting to pressurise her mother and her mother was finding this the hardest thing to struggle against. A group of *Meghwal* women who are all members of the village *mahila sangathan* described the pressures other people exert on families trying to resist the social norm of early marriage:

> 'If the girls just spend a little longer in the fields, the people will start to say they are a fifteen or sixteen year old *randa*.'[14]

> 'The milk for them has still not run dry and people say they are an uncontrolled *randa.*'

> 'Look who would allow them to wander and if they did everybody would start saying to us, "look girls wandering". And no one would take them.... You told us that where you come from you find your own marriage partner, your parents tell you to, but here, if girls go out like you, no one will take them. So who would take them?'

Pressure from the community is felt in terms of people's fear of losing their *izzat* (family and personal honour and respect), as this woman emphasises:

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[14] *Randa* literally means widow however it is used as a term of abuse implying sexual promiscuity.

'It is good whether the girl is young or old so long as we keep our *izzat*.'

The ultimate way to lose family honour and respect is for an unmarried daughter to get pregnant. The fear of this happening is a common reason given for marrying daughters so young:

> 'Now times have changed; unmarried girls are getting pregnant. Nowadays we can not trust anyone, not even the brothers. We have seen a lot of unmarried women with children, that is why we are afraid so we get them married early. They have to go to the farms, they have to take the animals and they have to go alone. Nowadays we can not trust anyone, not even brothers.... We have heard that five or six girls have become pregnant without being married, therefore we get them married at this young age.'

After a discussion as to how girls could protect themselves from sexual advances one woman gets quite angry and responds:

> '*Machaud* (mother-fucker)! It is necessary to watch them, if a girl wants to be like that what will we do? So what is the treatment for that? How can we watch them all the time? So it is better to give *phera* [literally meaning circling and refers to most important part of the wedding ceremony when the couple circle the sacrificial fire] and send her to her *sasural*.' *Middle-aged Meghwal woman.*

Despite a girl's behaviour in her *sasural* reflecting on the honour of her *pihar* family and village women feel they can pass the risk of a daughter dishonouring or bringing shame on the family to her *sasural* family:

> 'We think up until now we have taken care of her and now it is somebody else's turn. They will take it on and worry about their respect.' *Middle-aged Jat woman*

> 'We want to keep our respect after that it is their responsibility how they manage their respect.' *Young Meghwal woman.*

It was necessary for people to reconcile my difficult status as an unmarried woman in her thirties with freedom of movement and yet someone who was seen as respectable. People did this by identifying differences between themselves and I in order for me to continue to be seen as respectable while clearly not conforming to local social norms:

> 'We have been saying that you are older and wandering without marriage, if it was girls here wandering around then they would be having affairs and getting pregnant, because we are the people of the wilderness.' *Older Meghwal woman*

> 'We do the marriages at a younger age. In your society [addressing Monika and I] the girls sit in the houses but here they have to go to the fields and take care of the animals, and collect fodder and fuel. If some boy meets her, and he doesn't let her go home whole? But you people sit in the houses so you keep your *izzat,* but hungry people have to send their

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daughters to work. So if someone insults the girls who will be responsible for that? So in the dung creatures come (meaning if she loses her *izzat* it will attract bad things).' *Middle-aged Meghwal woman*

The dire consequences for a girl and her family of getting pregnant before marriage were made quite plain. The family would lose all respect and finding her a marriage partner would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. However, it was also acknowledged that the boy and the family of the boy 'who spoils someone's daughter' will be 'curse[d] but not as much' and that 'it will be difficult to find a girl to marry such a boy'. The women do not try to justify the differential treatment of boys and girls and their families but simply say 'it happens'.

Marriage is not something young girls look forward to but are instead resigned to. There are no alternatives apparent to them. Only one fifteen year old girl, the eldest of seven children in a very poor *Rajput* family, whose marriage had been arranged to a man in Calcutta, did say she was looking forward to her marriage. Presumably this was the exception as her life was so hard anyway and she assumed that living in a city would mean her standard of living would be better and her work burden would decrease. It is much more common to hear stories of girls crying every night before going to their *sasural* for the first time.

3.3.1 *Pihar – Sasural Dynamic*: Daughter And Daughter-In-Law

A girl's life drastically changes after *muklava*. She no longer lives in only one village but two, and has two families, her *pihar* village and family and her *sasural* village and family. This is a situation which is often overlooked in the ethnographic literature as Lambert (1997: 119) argues:

> 'Thus even where locality is recognised as socially significant, as in Fuller's statement that, "For the majority of Indians, including many urban migrants, the village where they were born and brought up or have lived for a long time is home in the full sense of the word" (1992: 129), an apparently uncontentious statement becomes questionable in view of the fact that for most women, 'home' means two villages rather than one.'

Two homes, or two villages, equates with two dominant identities: daughter and daughter-in-law.

Having already looked at a girl's life prior to marriage I now discuss the norms of behaviour and the role of a daughter-in-law and how this changes over time.

The short stories below typify women's experiences of first moving to their *sasural*.

'I was young and all the time crying, I was crying, I was crying. In the first few months I didn't like my *sasural*, all the time I was crying and just trying to hide my crying. My mother-in-law and father-in-law if they abused me, then I did my work, but I couldn't see my work because I had lots of water in my eyes... They abused me about my work, like telling me your parents didn't teach you to do the work properly.' *Middle-aged Meghwal woman*

'I didn't like anything in my *sasural*.... All the time I am crying because I remember my parents all the time I miss my parents, all the time. I didn't like anything in my *sasural*.' *Young Nayak woman.*

'It was hard I felt very bad, it was very difficult to live in *sasural*. Because now the girls understand what is a husband but at that time I didn't understand what is a husband. This rough man, where is he taking me? I'm not going.... In the beginning for five or six months I didn't feel any comfort here and all the time I thought I want to run, I want to escape, I want to run. It was very hard for me because I am from the city. I was used to living in Bikaner. When I saw my husband I was scared, I wanted to run to jump out of the window and run away. I didn't want to stay.... I was quite young and I didn't understand the meaning of husband. When my husband touched me I bit him. Then my mother-in-law said, 'what has happened to you?' And I said, 'he lifted my *ghunghat* and touched me'. So my *mami sas* (mother-in-law's sister-in-law) hit me with a spoon and sometimes she gave me *bhang ki pakora* (pakora made with marijuana) so I would become intoxicated. My husband had been married before so he was open, but I didn't understand.... When I was married here and came here I missed Bikaner and my family because it is a lonely place and the sound of the wind. Where could I go? I went to try and find the way so that I could go.' *Older Nayak woman.*

Another young woman explained that it was so awful when she was first married and went to her *sasural* that she blacked out after the marriages and cannot remember anything of her first two to three weeks of marriage. She was about fifteen at the time. Her younger sister was married into the same family at the same time. She explained how in the early weeks she had to look after her younger sister who did not understand how she had to behave and would 'throw off her *ghunghat* (veil)'.

These stories illustrate the distressing and, in some instances, deeply traumatic experience of moving from one's own family and village to one's *sasural* family and village. Each of the above also introduces a different aspect of what is expected from a daughter-in-law. The first one is undertaking an enormous workload under the instruction of her mother-in-law and possibly elder daughters-in-law. The second,

having a sexual relationship with her husband and producing children. The third moving from her home, family and village and developing a sense of loyalty towards her *sasural*, even though in many ways she is always marked out as not fully belonging. The last also mentions the adoption of *ghunghat* after marriage in a woman's *sasural*.

3.4 *Purdah* Practices: *Ghunghat*, Behaviour And Sex Segregation

> 'It is very hard to live like a Rajasthani woman. They have *ghunghat* so they have lots of pain.' *Young Rajput woman*

> '*Ghunghat* is better than anything. This is our tradition.' *Middle-aged Brahmin woman*

Agarwal (1994: 298) describes three interrelated categories of restrictions on male-female interactions: 'the veiling of women, the gender segregation of space, and the gendered specification of behaviour'. Agarwal (1994) points to how these categories operate in different ways in different places and among different groups of people. Likewise, the last two operate to varying degrees in non-*purdah* societies.

While finding the basis for their construction in the segregation of men and women, I found that generation, position in the family and place also influence the practice of *purdah* in Rajasthan. It is only particular women in particular places who have to adopt the behaviours embodied in these practices. Women have to adopt certain aspects of these same behaviours in front of particular women. First, veiling; *ghunghat* is practised in front of particular women as well as particular men. Second, the segregation of space; there are spaces in a village open to daughters of the village, whether they are married or not, which are closed to daughters-in-law. Third, the specification of behaviour; daughters-in-law in many cases have to adopt particular behaviours in front of their mothers-in-law, such as only speaking in whispers or only speaking when spoken to.

The first of Agarwal's (1994) three sets of practices embodying *purdah* ideology, 'the veiling of women' is the most potent symbol of a woman's status as daughter-in-law.[15]

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[15] For middle-class, urban and professionally employed women who wear sari, the *pallu* (end of the sari) will be pulled forward over her face to create ghunghat. For Muslim women who may continue to wear *salwar kameez* (baggy trousers with dress over the top) after marriage it is created using the *duppata*, (long piece of fabric) always worn with a *salwar kameez*. Almost all other rural women will use their *odhani*. An *odhani* is a veil which for most castes, excluding *Rajputs* and *Brahmins*, is made of red fabric printed with multicoloured designs which a woman adopts and wears all the time after marriage. It has a large coloured circle on the back. Prior to giving birth to a son this is orange and will be changed for one with a yellow circle after having a son. The only group of people in this region who do not practice this

Whenever a woman's dominant identity is that of daughter-in-law she adopts *ghunghat*. *Purdah* and the veiling of women it encompasses is widely recognised as something used to segregate men and women and particularly used to segregate women from elder male conjugal kin. However, in the area of my research *ghunghat* is also worn in front of older female kin both consanguineous and fictive. However, whereas there is no flexibility in conforming to the norms of *ghunghat* in front of men, there is in front of women. Daughters-in-law do not in all cases wear *ghunghat* in front of their mothers-in-law. In the main those who do not are older themselves and may be mothers-in-law as well and/or their father-in-law has died.

In practice this translates into a newly married young daughter-in-law wearing *ghunghat* at virtually all times as she is rarely alone or in the company of just her husband or younger kin. As a woman gets older not only may she not have to wear *ghunghat* in front of older female kin but also there are less people in the village who are elder to her. Whereas a young woman will always walk around her *sasural* village wearing *ghunghat* an elderly woman will walk open faced only pulling her veil over her if an older man comes in sight. Since *ghunghat* is only worn in front of conjugal kin, real and fictive, it is never worn in a woman's *pihar* village. As such *ghunghat* is not only a marker of gender and position in the family but also a marker of place. As the quote at the beginning of this section illustrates women use *ghunghat* as a shorthand to describe the gender ascribed subordination and limitations faced in their lives.

Ghunghat, is understood in terms of showing respect towards one's in-laws and *sasural* village. It was not always clear to me why a woman would be wearing *ghunghat* among certain people and in a certain place. If I asked for explanation I was invariably told 'she has her *ghunghat* to show respect' or 'because she is a daughter-in-law'. For instance Meena *bai* the village *dai* (traditional mid-wife) told me about a *Jat* woman who had had nine miscarriages and stillbirths since she had married. In all of these cases Meena had been there and looked after her and saved her life on at least one occasion. Despite this very intimate relationship, the fact that the *Jat* woman was not a new daughter-in-law and is of a higher caste than Meena and that this was an informal visit between neighbours, with only Meena *bai*, her daughters-in-law, Monika and

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aspect of *purdah* are *Jains*. The extent to which both *purdah* and *ghunghat* are practised varies. In a number of urban families full *ghunghat* is not the norm but in nearly all cases daughters-in-law will be expected to cover their heads in front of at least their elder in-laws.

myself present, the *Jat* woman wore her *ghunghat*. Meena explained to me, 'she does this to show respect to me'.

Ghunghat is one among many things used to signify a woman's married status. A woman's dress and, in particular her jewellery, changes after marriage. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into this in any detail. However, just as women talk about *ghunghat* as a symbol of their status they also refer to the heavy silver ankle rings which *Nayak, Meghwal* and *Bhat* women, among other groups, wear after marriage. These cause large calluses around the women's ankles and quite obviously are a source of discomfort when first worn. The symbolic links between this and women's more generalised oppression were clearly recognised by this elderly *Meghwal* woman:

> 'We have been tied here and here (pointing to her ankles).... We are given that tool to cut grass, it is very hard.... We have got this (pointing to ankles) so we are tied. We can't take them off.'

In a similar manner women occasionally talk of the physical discomforts of *ghunghat*. A woman who although still a daughter-in-law in the family has married children herself told me that she never goes out because if she does she has to wear *ghunghat* and if she wears *ghunghat* she feels like she is suffocating and cannot breath.

The second *purdah* practice, identified by Agarwal (1994), 'the gendered specification of behaviour' is most strongly demonstrated by considering the norms of behaviour ascribed to young daughters-in-law. A girl's behaviour is strictly curtailed upon moving to her *sasural*. For example, a daughter-in-law should never speak in front of those she would wear *ghunghat* in front of. When verbal communication is necessary daughters-in-law speak in whispers. As with *ghunghat* this is strictly practised in front of male conjugal kin with more flexibly in front of elder women. A woman gains more right to voice as she gets older and her position in the family and village changes. The links between a right to voice, the symbolic use of *ghunghat* and women's status are explored further in direct relation to political participation in Chapter Five.

The third *purdah* practice, identified by Agarwal (1994), 'the gendered segregation of space' in which all spaces outside the home are restricted for a daughters-in-law unless there for work purposes. Women's use of public space and their behaviour within it is strictly curtailed even within the context of work duties. For instance when riding a

camel cart out to a family's fields for work in the morning the daughters-in-law were not allowed to ride on the cart, with the rest of us, until we reached the outskirts of the village. This same procedure was performed on the way back. As soon as we reached the edge of the village the camel cart would stop and the daughters-in-law would have to get off and walk behind it through the village.[16]

In the case of rural households, except the very wealthy, a daughter-in-law will in reality leave the house quite often in order to collect water, work in the fields and go to the toilet. On occasion women would respond to my questioning of where they go in the village with the explanation that they stay in their houses and they go to the toilet. Franco, Macwan and Ramanathan (2000: 115-116) describe women's visits to the outskirts of the village to go to the toilet as a 'physical and mental liberative space'. This is one of the few places young women will go without work and often in small groups and, '[g]iven the exhausting and time-consuming nature of their daily work, this space becomes a social space within which some freedom may be enjoyed' (ibid.). While the use of this space in this manner was not something women directly referred to it was apparent on seeing women walking together in the early mornings out to the sand dunes on the edges of the village.

As women become more established in the village their mobility within the village and beyond it increases. They have more freedom to make social visits to other family members and friends. They may also visit nearby towns to shop, particularly for a wedding or other social occasions. Husbands and sons almost always do everyday shopping.

Space is also delineated within the home. In a home big enough to have two or more rooms, the rooms at the front of the house will be occupied predominantly by men. When men and women are in the same room together women will always occupy a space below that of men. If there is anything available to sit on men will occupy this and women will invariably sit on the floor. Even many elderly women will only sit on the floor if their husbands are present. In one household, which I stayed in regularly, a daughter-in-law was very ill but lying on the floor. When I asked her why, she

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[16] The only explanation I received as to why this was happening was simply that it would have not looked right for daughters-in-law to ride on the camel cart in the village.

explained that in her *sasural* she could not lie on the *mudchar* (string bed). The levels of compliance with these ideals of gender norms vary from one household to the next.

If private spaces are assumed to be the home and public spaces are assumed to be the rest of the village, in the Bikaneri context they can not easily be delineated. This is clearly illustrated in the way a 'private' space can become a 'public' space for women depending on who is present. For example a senior woman in her household who lives separately to her father and mother-in-law, or after they have died, is free to talk, be unveiled and relax in her own home. However, as soon as an older man from the village walks in her whole demeanour changes to that adopted in the public realm. Her *ghunghat* will be pulled down and her voice will change to a whisper. The private space of her home becomes the public space of the village and her demeanour changes accordingly.

This section has demonstrated that *purdah* practices are not only influenced by gender but also generation, position in the family, place and space.

3.5 Women's Work

A daughter-in-law should never be seen idling. Beyond producing children the main given for bringing a daughter-in-law to the village is to ensure there is someone to do the work:

> 'We will get them married and then we will get their wives here and they can help me (with the work).' *Older Nayak woman talking about her grandson.*

> 'I'm not going to give my daughter to a big family she can't make *roti*[17] for twenty people'. *Young Rajput woman talking about her twelve year old daughter.*

> 'Before the marriage of my *devar's* (husband's younger brother) I did all the household work, like cooking for the whole family, taking care of the children, looking after the goats, looking after guests, cleaning, washing clothes and the like. After my *devranis* (husband's younger brother's wives) came I was able to relax... I have four *nanads* (husband's sisters) so I used to work for them also like washing their clothes and cooking. They were younger then.' *Young Rajput woman*

This last quote also illustrates how household structure affects a woman's workload and changes over time. Similarly, it indicates the hierarchical structure that exists among

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[17] *Roti* are unleavened bread made from either wheat or millet which form the staple diet. Talking about how many *roti* have to be made is a common way to express how much work a woman has to do.

daughters-in-law. However, this hierarchy does not, necessarily, preclude friendship and camaraderie between co-daughters-in-law.

A woman's workload after marriage, particularly in poor families, is relentless until she has her own daughters-in-law. It includes household work, farm work, childcare and intermittent paid manual work. A woman's workload is not only affected by household structure but also by the time of year. During the harvesting season the workload is intense. During the hottest season when there is little farm work, unless the household is very large with few women workers, the workload lessens considerably. Whatever the amount of work, a daughter-in-law is expected to be seen to be working at all times and to be the first up and the last to go to sleep at night. For this reason even when the workload does lessen daughters-in-law often make what work they have last all day. Therefore, whereas daughters and senior women in the main only work out of necessity, daughters-in-law not only work out of necessity but also in conformity to gender and generational ideals.

Particular tasks are ascribed to particular positions in the family. The different tasks ascribed to men and women in farm work have been described in detail elsewhere and I will not go in to detail here. [18] Suffice to say that while certain tasks such as ploughing are strictly gender ascribed and enforced, others such as harvesting are undertaken by both men and women. Either the mother/mother-in-law or the eldest daughter-in-law is responsible for the *chula* (open fire stove) and the preparation of food. Other household tasks such as sweeping, washing, cleaning, gathering fuel and caring for animals are all the responsibility of daughters-in-law if they are in the family, and, failing that mothers and daughters. Certain aspects of childcare, particularly in terms of affection and playing, are the responsibility of grandparents. It is, generally not acceptable for parents to show affection towards their children in front of their own parents or in-laws.

Paid manual work, such that there is, can be undertaken by all members of the family depending of who can be released according to the time of year. Most usually men will be the first to undertake paid manual labour but when available and necessity dictates

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[18]For example ee Dube, (1986); Agarwal (1994)

women do also. Similarly, from my experience of both government and NGO drought relief sites[19] are places where both men and women work.

Although gender ascribed work roles are quite rigidly fixed there is still room for flexibility. Certain household tasks, particularly looking after animals, which are principally seen as women's work are also undertaken by unmarried sons and even married sons and fathers in some cases. The domestic work of cooking and cleaning is strictly women's work but in extreme circumstances some men will undertake this too:

> 'Sometimes I make *roti* for the family. All the household work I should do when my mother and wife are suffering from fever then I do all the household work.' *Middle-aged Meghwal man.*

This same man goes on to express his recognition of how hard women's work is:

> 'Women get ill more often than men because they have to work in the cold during the winters, whereas men just wake up and go to their work. They do not wash clothes and fetch water, this type of thing…. Because they are working in the winter, you have lots of woollen clothes but our women do not have this type of clothes. If they wore this type of clothing how would they do the household work. That is the problem for them.'

Women's and in particular daughters-in-laws' workload is widely recognised and valued. People actually boast about how hard women work. Whether speaking to urban or rural residents, educated or uneducated people, men or women all are keen to express how hard Rajasthani women work. The suffering of women in this manner was not something to be ashamed of but instead something to be proud of. Village women were also keen to demonstrate how hard their work is often by showing their physical suffering, be this the calluses and blisters on their hands or talking of the pains in their legs. This recognition of women's work contradicts a lot of the literature which states that women's work is seen as 'low, secondary and unimportant' (Franco et. al. 2000: 92-3), 'devalued' (Unnithan-Kumar: 1997: 31) or not seen at all, 'invisible' (Palriwala, 1991: 2768-2769).

Despite it being recognised that daughters-in-law work the hardest in the household it is also acknowledged that they have the least power and access to resources. However, their lack of power and resources can not be ascribed to a false perception of their contribution to the household, as expressed in the co-operative conflicts model of

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[19] Drought relief sites provide minimum wage paid employment and/or wheat allowances to people. Typically the work involves digging a reservoir for the village.

household power dynamics. Instead this unequal system of distribution is justified simply in terms of their position and status in the family and village. A woman is seen as a 'follower' of her husband and as such always secondary. This is illustrated by this explanation as to why a husband eats before his wife:

> 'Because it is the husband's house. Because we are the followers, so I follow my husband.'
> *Older Bhat woman.*

Another reason given to justify this unequal distribution of labour is that women get to rest on visits to their *pihar* when they will not be expected to work. I was teasing one of the sons in a large household with three resident daughters-in-law, who work from dawn until late in the evening, that the following day should be a rest day for all the women and that the sons should do the work. Rather than being shocked or offended by my suggestion he simply explained that the daughters-in-law didn't need to have a rest when they are at his home as they all go back to their *pihar* regularly and that is when they are able to rest.

3.6   *Pihar – Sasural* Dynamic: Two villages, Two Families, Two Identities

> 'When we bring our daughter she spends four or five months here and when we send her to her *sasural* she spends four or five months there.' *Middle-aged Nayak woman.*

As introduced above women, after marriage, live in both their *pihar* and *sasural*. How much time is spent in each place is dependent on many factors, such as the age of the woman, the number of co-daughters-in-law in her *sasural* family as well as individual relationships. In general young daughters-in-law will be in their *sasural* during the harvesting season, when there is the most work to do, and in their *pihar* during the hot season. Palriwala (1991) found during her research that a woman's natal family would call her to her *pihar* or attempt to keep her at her *pihar* when there was a demand for agricultural labour. Contrary to this I found that it was more common for the *sasural* family to have first claim to a woman's labour. A daughter on a return visit to her *pihar* is not expected to work. Daughters do, however, work in their *pihar* when necessary, particularly if her *bhabhi(s)* (brother's wife) has returned to her/their *pihar* at the same time.

A woman who had been married into the same family as her sister explained that they take turns in visiting their *pihar* because the one who remains in her *sasural* will take over the other sister's work. A young woman I knew in her *pihar* spent nearly all her

time there as her in-laws physically abused her. Her mother would try to keep her with her as much as possible. Unfortunately, when the workload was great her in-laws would come and collect her and take her back to her *sasural*. Her mother, although one of the most active members of the village *mahila sangathan*, felt powerless to prevent this. Another example was a woman who lived in Bikaner and her *pihar* was only an hour and a half train journey away, with one train a day. Despite this and due to the fact that her *sasural* family was very large and consequently there was a lot of work she was only allowed, by her in-laws, to visit her *pihar* family once a year for two weeks.

The duration and frequency of visits a woman makes to her *pihar* lessen overtime as she becomes more settled into her *sasural*, has her own children and gains more status within her *sasural* family and village.

Visits to her *pihar* are usually a woman's only respite from work as well as the place where she feels safe and has the strongest emotional ties. A woman becomes a daughter again in the village and as such she does not wear *ghunghat* and speak in whispers. She regains relative freedom of movement and association. One young woman described having to go back to her *sasural* after visiting her *pihar* as like having to go back to prison.

This constant, if constrained, movement of young married women between their *pihar* and *sasural* is a critical part of household structural dynamics. Likewise, it impacts upon the gender dynamics of the village. During the hot season when many young women leave their *sasural* for visits to their *pihar* initial impressions of gender roles and relations in a particular village can be quite different to during periods of harvesting when women in this age group are in the main daughters-in-law.

Young married women are one of the most mobile of social groups, even if as Palriwala (1991: 2763) draws attention to this mobility is 'in fixed demarcated bounds'. This mobility extends beyond simple physical movement to the ability to adapt to different expectations of demeanour and conduct. As stated at the beginning of this chapter flexibility in women's behaviour is seen as desirable from the beginning of her life. This adaptability in women's behaviour and in others behaviour towards different women in different contexts is not only accepted but also acknowledged and expected. Although people's ability to adapt to multiple identities is recognised to exist within all

social systems, in Northwest Rajasthan this adaptability takes on a highly exaggerated form in the case of women, as they move between *sasural* and *pihar* villages. Raheja and Gold (1994: 108) also point to this switching of identities by women in their two different villages. How society in general and individual women, use and are used, by this acceptability of exaggerated adaptation to differing identities is explored further in Chapter Five.

3.6.1 Staying At Home, Returning Home: Women Who Live In Their *Pihar*

There are a small but significant number of women who live in their *pihar* on a permanent basis. These women knowing the village and its residents well and having freedom of movement and association were important informants and village guides during my research. The reasons that these women lived in their *pihar* fell into two categories, one was household survival. In these instances the woman her husband and children had all come to her *pihar*. The other reason was the woman's survival, when women had moved back to their *pihar* to escape abusive and violent in-laws and husbands.

Where household survival is the motivating factor it is because the woman and her husband could either access better land or employment in her *pihar* village over that in her *sasural*. In one example the woman concerned was about seventy years old and had spent half her married life living in her *sasural* prior to moving back to her *pihar*. She explained that they had land in her *sasural* but the water had been bad and people were dying so they had moved back to her *pihar*. In her *pihar* she has access to a small plot of land, but not enough to sustain the family. Migration for farming work in the Punjab and Haryana is still necessary for household survival.

Bina *bai* an extremely dynamic and resourceful woman in her early thirties with seven children has been particularly mobile throughout her married life. Her *sasural* village is in Gujurat but she began married life in an urban area of Gujurat where her husband worked in a factory. After that job came to an end they lived in her *sasural* village for a number of years. Bina with her husband and children later on returned to Rajasthan in search of employment. They lived in Bikaner town for a while where her husband worked in a wool processing factory and Bina made *papad*[20] in her house. After some

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[20] *Papad* is an Indian snack sometimes referred to as *popadoms*. Making *papad* is extremely labour intensive physically uncomfortable work which involves hours and hours of sitting hunched over rolling out the dough into

time they then moved to her *pihar* village where her husband worked on the open caste mine until he hurt his back and was no longer able to work. They have no land in the village and make a living from share cropping and paid agricultural work. Bina is also educated and as such is the village *Aganwarri*[21] worker. Upon moving back to the village they had no where to live but a *Jat* man allowed them to live in his vacant house for a year if they repaired and maintained it. Recently URMUL trust had supplied them with a new one room house. Her only other family members in the village are her mother, brother and his wife who have no children. Her brother is terribly sick but has not been diagnosed with anything in particular. Bina has also played an important role in the village women's organisation as she is the only literate woman involved.

A similar example is Ganga devi, a *Jat* woman in her mid thirties who had spent the first five to ten years living in her *sasural* village but then the whole family had moved to her *pihar* when her husband secured employment in the same area. She is now the *ward panch* for her village.

Shanti *bai*, the village *dai*, now in her sixties returned to her *pihar* when her children were small as she had suffered abuse and violence in her *sasural*. Her brother had looked after her and she initially lived in his house with him. Now they lived separately but next door to each other. Shanti's mother had been a *dai* and her skills and position had been passed down to Shanti. She was able to make a small amount of money from this practice. However, since payments are voluntary it would not have been enough at any time to support her family.

In another village a young woman had recently moved back with her mother as her in-laws had beaten her and set fire to her. Her children at this time were still living with their father and there was an on-going court case.

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very thin rounds. This work which many women undertake is notoriously badly paid. In fact people will refer to *papad* making as the worst possible job.

[21] *Aganwari* centres are the backbone of the Government of India's Integrated Child Development Programme (ICDS), which is supported by various donor organisations. They are normally located in house of the *aganwari* worker, a local woman who receives a very small honoraria. Ideally her responsibilities include: organising pre school in–formal education for 3 – 6 years olds; supplying food supplements to malnourished children under the age of six and pregnant women; giving health and nutrition advice to parents; assisting the primary health centre in the implementation of the ICDS programme and maintaining records and submitting monthly progress reports and so on and so forth. From my personal experience the supply of food supplements seemed to be the dominant activity and the one spoken of the most.

What this collection of stories illustrates is that social norms are not fixed. If a family has more chance of survival in a woman's *pihar* then norms of patrilineal residence can be transgressed. Household survival takes precedence: gender ideals adapt to differing situations.

Furthermore, it shows that a woman's *pihar* is a site of refuge, a 'fall-back' position for her. A woman's *pihar* often provides both emotional and economic security for her and her children. However, access to this security is most usually not automatic and it may take quite dire circumstances for a woman to be able to return to her *pihar* on any kind of permanent basis. This quote is from a forty year old *Meghwal* man who showed great regard and respect for his mother, wife and daughters and yet he still stressed:

> 'Because women are the followers, because women have left their parents and come with
> men, it is their duty to keep silent.... If our son-in-law gives some kind of beating or some
> kind of thing to our daughters then it is our family, our social tradition to keep silent, but
> when they are completely wrong it pains us.'

3.8 Changing Status: Mother, Grandmother And Mother-In-Law

As already mentioned a woman's status in her *sasural* changes as she grows older. Factors such as: sons marrying and daughters-in-law entering the household; a woman's household separating from her in-laws; her mother-in-law dying and simply the passing of time all contribute to: a lessening of her work load; a greater access to the resources; some diminishing of expectations of *purdah* and an increase in her influence in her *sasural* family.

A mother-in-law's responsibilities in the family include, managing and organising household work, managing or at least looking after the household finances, playing with her grandchildren, and, in poor households, income earning activities. Middle-aged and elderly women can be seen working on government funded construction projects as well as contributing to household income generation such as agricultural work and other paid labour work.

In this position a woman gains power in terms of her personal autonomy and 'power-over' others, principally her daughters-in-law. Young married women are expected to ask their mother-in-law for permission to do anything which is outside of their normal work routine. Mothers-in-law often set themselves apart from daughters-in-law: they

complain that daughters-in-law have less work than they did. To a large extent this is true, with the advent of electronic grain mills in most villages grinding wheat or millet by hand (an extremely labour intensive task) is rarely done anymore. The acceptance of mothers-in-laws' control over their daughters-in-law and their reluctance to let go of any of this 'power-over' can be seen in the following quotes which were made by a group of older *Meghwal* women:

'Today's daughters-in-law behave like mothers-in-law!'

'Mothers-in-law are too lenient.'

'Anything they want to do they can do it. Whatever they want to do they can do it. Mothers-in-law don't say anything to them.' (*She is very angry at this point*)

Of course, some mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, in spite of the social dictates which serve to divide them, have good supportive relationships of a more egalitarian nature. Similarly, some women, particularly once their own daughters leave, desire a closer relationship with their daughters-in-law. A *Nayak* woman in her mid thirties with very young newly married daughters-in-law complained that her daughters-in-law do not <u>talk</u> to her, but just do as they are told.

The role of men in this power play between senior and junior women is ambiguous and dependent on the developmental stage of the household. Mothers complain that their sons stick up for their wives and daughters-in-law complain that their husband's do not stand up to their mothers. There is undoubtedly truth in both, depending on the individual circumstances of the family. However, as a woman gets older she becomes more and more dependent on her sons for her own welfare and may have less contact with her natal family. This is counteracted by cultural expectations of respectful treatment towards older people, as exemplified by looking at the position of widowed women in the family.

An elderly widow gains respect and reverence due to her age; she is the eldest member of the family and this gives her a right to be consulted in all family decisions:

'This is another fact, we only have our mother not our father. She is the eldest person of our family. We talk to our mother about everything: what we want to do: what work we are going to do. All matters we discuss with her.' *Meghwal man in his early forties.*

'I am the head of the house. If there is some work to be done then I talk with my mother and she gives me guidance.' *Middle aged Jat man.*

'My mother is still alive and she is the oldest person in the family so we have to listen to her.' *Jain man in his mid forties.*

'All decisions are in my hands.' *Nayak widow in her early sixties, who had two grown up sons.*

The often terrible treatment suffered by in particularly high caste Hindu widows in India is well documented.[22] However, the position of the widowed women I knew who in the main were older, poor and from 'low' caste groups, certainly challenges the stereotypical image of the downtrodden Indian widow.

This analysis of women in the relatively powerful role of mother-in-law and senior woman of the household disrupts one-dimensional images of Rajasthani women as either powerless or only able to express their agency through resistance. Instead as Unnithan-Kumar (1997: 66) illustrates women also assert their 'power over' by controlling other women as do men:

> '[T]hey reflect the fact that power, for men or women, was connected with control of women. This explains why Rajput women who occupied positions of power became the instruments in cementing and perpetuating a tradition that was most oppressive to women themselves.'

A woman occupies multiple identities within the village, she maybe a senior woman in her household with considerable power over other family members. She may also be well respected and sought out for advice by other village residents and family members. However, her identity still encompasses that of daughter-in-law in the context of her *sasural* village, which continues to restrict her right to voice and involvement in village affairs.

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[22] E.g. see Chen and Dreze (1994); Owen (1996)

3.8 Intra-Family Relationships: Decision Making

Decision making processes are considered not because overt decision making is necessarily the best measure of where power lies in the household but because the way people talk about decision making processes reveals the contradictions between idealised cultural norms and reality. The conflict and contradiction between idealised gender roles and relations and lived reality is constantly being negotiated.

The common image of family decision making presented, to me during my fieldwork, is one where the eldest male in the family makes all the decisions and if the eldest person is a woman she is, at the least, consulted. This conforms to idealised norms of family behaviour and is justified in two ways. First, the eldest man always makes the right decision and second, it is the correct way to do things so it does not matter if the decision itself is actually wrong:

> 'I never take any decision on family and other things.... although there has never been a situation where our opinions differed, where there has been an argument, but if I feel he's deciding something wrong then I will tell him and if *he thinks that I'm not making the correct decision* then he will tell me.' *Middle-aged Brahmin woman*

> 'My son's father decides these things. If he decides well then it is OK if he decides badly then it is OK, nobody opposes him. Even if we know it is a wrong or bad thing we still agree with him. In our family we have this type of tradition we do not turn on the one who is saying. We give proper respect to the aged persons' talk, so it is not good to turn his tongue.... [in regard to children's marriages] Father decides, women never decide.... Me and my husband we sit down and decide the things but my son and my daughter-in-law they obey our orders.... I handle the marriage work and I handle the money. In our families they give respect to the elderly person and the elderly family members.' *Middle-aged Meghwal woman.*

These quotes contain obvious contradictions. Both these women present an image in which their husbands are the only or the primary decision-maker. At the same time they indicate that they are part of the process. The woman speaking in the second quote is in fact keen to assert that she has managerial control over certain key areas of family life. Furthermore, knowing this family well it was obvious that this woman played a large role not only in decision-making within the family but also in financial and business dealings with outsiders.

In the main unless people are particularly open or until they knew me well enough they would present an image of a perfectly harmonious family. This ideal of family harmony is seen to be maintained through an obedience to gender norms: conformity to gender norms is seen as essential for family harmony and family harmony is of primary importance within the construction of gender norms. According to such norms the maintenance of household harmony is dependent on relinquishing all authority to patriarchal dictator, who it is assumed will be benevolent. Benevolence is not an essential element within this cultural construct of household relations and a woman's individual wellbeing is quite openly accepted as secondary to that of household harmony. This patriarchal ideal is reliant on the silencing of women's voices of dissent or disagreement. The justification for the denial of women's right to voice is based on the acceptance that they do not have the same rights in their *sasural* as those who were born there. Hema *bai* a middle-aged *Meghwal* woman who described herself as my teacher was keen to explain this construction, its maintenance and the justification for it:

> 'Women should keep silent. If women don't keep silent then their honour is destroyed in
> the sand. If she doesn't keep silent she will be hit.... It looks very ugly, all the other
> family members, the relatives [the meaning in this includes the caste community as well]
> think it is a very bad family: 'they are always arguing in their family'. Then it will be hard
> for us to get our sons and daughters engaged and married.... If we argue with our husbands
> it is a very bad thing. We are the followers, the women. Men provide us with food and
> shelter so if we fight with our husbands and we argue with our husbands the older villagers
> and all the other people think it is a bad thing. So women should keep silent. If women
> don't keep silent and he is very hot tempered and loses his temper then he will leave her
> and her image in her *sasural* and after sometime in her *pihar* will be destroyed. So it is
> good to keep silent in front of our husbands.... It is necessary for me to keep silent, other
> people say your husbands do all these things but you keep silent. It is our family honour, so
> for our respect we keep silent, otherwise people will talk about us. Our family would be
> disturbed. If no one keeps silent and they keep arguing with each other they will end up in
> the police station and the police will take them to prison. The women go the men go and
> the children are ruined and they sell their property in the court case so it would be a big
> problem.'

Hema *bai* clearly anticipates grave consequences if women do not acquiesce to gender norms of women's silence. She also recognises women's weaker fall-back position in terms of material well-being:

> 'If the woman is innocent she can't leave the house. If there is a son, the son's *jati*
> (meaning lineage) is decided by the father's *jati* and there is land in the family so the land is
> given to the son. So who is the owner of the house? Me? The man? If someone comes to

our house and asks where is the house owner? They don't want to know about the women members. The man makes the house.'

It was common for women to acknowledge the threat of violence from men as a reason to keep silent as well:

> 'How is it possible that he follows me? If he had said, 'no I will carry on my daughter's education' and I had opposed him he would slap me so how can I argue with him?' *Young Khati woman*

This is not evidence that the women who spoke in this manner were being beaten, some, or many, may have been, but it does reflect the acceptance of male violence toward women who defy norms of female obedience.

Another woman explained how she used her expected silence as a tool to her advantage. She both managed to maintain family honour and respect and at the same time questioned and defied her husband's wishes. This woman's better bargaining position because she lives in her *pihar* should be noted:

> 'Men can shout. Women can't shout… If a woman shouts the neighbours will say, 'oh, the woman is dominating her husband'…. We don't look good… If he shouts then I become quiet, then afterwards I tell him that he has to do this. If one shouts and the other person becomes silent then that person will also become silent and then I tell him.' *Young Rajput woman*

The woman cited below is an exception to the norm, but the quote is used to demonstrate how sole responsibility for decision making is also burden:

> 'I organise whatever work has to be done in the family, I make the decisions and my mother-in-law she also gives her opinion…. Mostly it is me who makes, whatever I say, he does it. My husband is only for earning… If there is some problem in the family… I will tell my husband and he says 'I don't know, only you know'…. I have the responsibility for everything education, and everything. My children and even my mother-in-law are also free from responsibility… I have to take…. No other way, it is a constraint.' *Middle-aged Jain woman*

This woman's husband agreed that his wife was both the main decision-maker and took ultimate responsibility for the family's welfare. In other cases husband and wives told different stories as to how power was negotiated in their families. Frequently men's versions of events and family dynamics are more straightforward. They present themselves as the ones who make major decisions, in conformity to generalised gender

norms. Women's stories were often more complicated and contradictory, reflecting the operation of women's power as more diffuse and hidden as well as being in contradiction to socially sanctioned norms.

3.8.1 Intra-Family Relationships: Separating The Family

Insights into the complexities of familial gender norms and power relations are revealed here through a closer examination of the dynamic nature of household structure and organisation. This examination of the reasons why married sons and their immediate families separate from their parental home and create a new household further shows the ways in which people negotiate conformity with ideal gender norms and resistance to these. It also illustrates an area of family life where daughters-in-law manage to exert a certain amount of power in order to change the structure of a household to their advantage. One of the most obvious reasons for separation is that it is expected at some point in the development of a family. Only one son, most often the youngest, is expected to stay living with his parents.

Despite this the almost exclusive reason given as to why a son separates his family is that the women in the household were arguing and fighting:

> 'There was a dispute and fighting in the family so we decided to separate.... We were all fighting, *devrani, jhetani, sas, bo* (husband's young brother's wife, husband's elder brother's wife, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law).... Brothers never fight! It was only women fighting.... Fighting was always about work. If one woman does lots of work and the other doesn't it is a big issue.' *Young Rajput woman*

This situation can be looked at from two perspectives. One it shows that daughters-in-law are able to exert some power despite their highly constrained position. This is supported by Kolenda's (1994: 75) research which found households into which sister or cousin sister sets had married were less likely to separate. There are particular advantages for sister sets to stay living together as discussed earlier regarding visits to their *pihar*. It can also be argued that not only do conflicts 'naturally occur' but that daughters-in-law are actually in a position to engineer conflict in order to encourage a separation which would be advantageous to them, as they would automatically become the senior woman in a new household.

Unnithan-Kumar (1997: 103) drawing on Parry's (1979) research draws attention to the possibility of arguments between women being a façade behind which men facilitate

their own household agendas. The ideology that brothers never fight and that there is always familial harmony necessitate that arguments are seen to have been instigated first by women and second by those who have more recently joined the family unit and are therefore still seen as outsiders.

The truth is probably a mixture of both stories. Recognition of the first view acknowledges that even though co daughters-in-law are potentially a woman's best allies and support in her *sasural* they are often living in a potentially conflictual situation of having to compete for scarce resources. Acceptance of the second view would serve to deny young women any role in familial negotiation but instead present them as simply adhering to the whims and allegiances of their husbands.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has first emphasised the way in which generation and place interact with gender hierarchies and norms to determine a woman's status at a particular time in a particular space. As such, I argue that the category of woman needs to be disaggregated beyond the more commonly cited social stratifiers of caste, class, religion and economic status. The Chapters which follow incorporate these differences into the analysis of the effects of women's political participation.

Second it has illustrated how Rajasthani women are both physically and in terms of personal identity both mobile and adaptable. Rajasthani women have multiple identities which are constantly changing according to place and space. I argue that the continual movement between *sasural* and *pihar* villages, which demands a constant shift in women's behaviour leads to Rajasthani women having an exaggerated form of, socially recognised, adaptability to differing positions and roles and changes in personal identity. This adaptability in women's identity has implications for how women's political participation is understood.

Third, this chapter illustrated how decisions are made through processes of negotiation between conformity and resistance to gender norms. In considering the expectations of conformity to gender norms and how people negotiate their lives within these, this chapter has demonstrated that rather than being fixed immutable structures and ideologies gender relations adapt to changing situations. The potentials and limitations of this flexibility in gender norms are explored in the proceeding chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR

'WOMEN... HAVE SOFT CORNERS' CORRUPTION, EXPECTATIONS AND EMPOWERMENT

'Two Indias – one future. India must overcome major challenges to achieve a great future. Women will be the change agents for the transformation that must occur.' *The Hunger Project*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the motivations of those who support, encourage and initiate women's participation in village level politics. It identifies two prominent sets of rationales which motivate them to prioritise women's participation. First, that which sees participation as bringing about an improvement in women's status and well being: the empowerment rationale. Second, that which perceives women's participation as the most efficient means to institute local level, social and economic development: the efficiency rationale. These motivations are divided for reasons of analytical clarity, although in reality they often become conflated.

The empowerment rationale is informed by discourses which see political participation in itself as empowering. The efficiency argument is informed by discourses which essentialise and exaggerate certain supposed characteristics of women. Both of these discourses are fundamentally flawed and, as such, while I do not deny the benefits that women's participation may bring about, I contend that as long as it rests on these assumptions the benefits will be severely limited.

The idea that participation is necessarily empowering can be critiqued on many levels and has been discussed at length in Chapter Two. This chapter, however, focuses on one aspect of women's participation, the reasons why women participate in the first place. I demonstrate how the divergence in the motivations of those promoting participation as a means to women's empowerment and the motivations of the women who become involved not only affects the participatory process, but also restricts the potential benefits to women of such participation.

In the case of the *mahila sangathans* I consider the reasons given by NGO workers[1] for encouraging the participation of women and contrast these with the reasons the women gave for becoming involved. I argue that for many women participation has become something they have to do in order to be given paid work, housing, healthcare and the like. I look in more detail at one particular example, in which the *sangathan* attempted to turn an area of land, owned by the Forestry Department, into a cultivated area of trees and vegetables. I discuss different women's motivations for undertaking this project and address why the activity was not sustainable over the long term.

In the case of the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions a significant number of women felt that they had to participate because their family members or other community members had told them to. Some felt they had indeed been forced into their political position. As such, in a number of cases women's participation was imposed upon them. This came about because of their subordinate position within the family rather than as a consequence of any increased sense of self-confidence or self-worth, typical requisites for a process of empowerment.

Following on from this, the second motivation for encouraging women's participation, the efficiency rationale is discussed. The discourse informing this constructs women as either naturally or conditioned to be more altruistic, hard working and compliant. Using the reasons provide by URMUL Trust staff for encouraging women's participation instead of men's or that of both men and women this discussion demonstrates that the NGO workers although purporting a desire for women's empowerment, were at the same time motivated by the belief that the women's *sangathans* are more successful in terms of the NGO's overriding goals for social development.

In regard to women's participation in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions there is an assumption coming from many different people, including NGO workers, gender activists and the general public, in particular the urban middle-classes, that women's participation will lead to a more efficient and less corrupt political system. I focus on attitudes towards women and corruption because first, corruption is recognised to be a major impediment to social development in the region and second, a pervasive culture

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[1] My analysis is based on the reasons given by individual employees of URMUL Trust rather than a composite analysis of the organisation and its motivations. I did not do an organisational analysis of URMUL Trust however any organisation is made up of its individual members.

of corruption exists. The example of one former woman *sarpanch* who was arrested on charges of corruption is discussed.

Finally, this chapter argues that the discourses underlying the motivations for initiating women's participation give rise to unrealistic expectations in regard to the outcomes of women's participation. This leads to a situation whereby 'women's projects' and women politicians can only but fall short of the expectations and demands being placed on them.

4.2 Reasons For Participation: Empowerment And Welfare

There can be no doubt that the NGO workers I spoke with are concerned to increase women's decision making power, freedom of movement and improve their overall well-being. Likewise, the reservation for women in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions is predicted by many to cause a 'revolutionary' change in women's status across India, as this quote from a senior and long standing employee of URMUL Trust expresses:

> 'The plus point is the 73rd amendment. It is really a very good stick. Women have got a space now, so I am hopeful that, definitely women will come up and this gender discrimination will reduce. The whole scene will change now.'

The ways in which women's participation in both *Panchayati Raj* institutions and *mahila sangathans* are envisaged to benefit women can be divided into Molyneux's (1985) analytical categories of practical and strategic gender interests. Practical gender interests arise from the concrete condition of women's lives, created by gendered roles and relations. They are concerned with everyday living condition, with women's practical needs such as adequate food and water, health care and employment. Practical interests are consequently deeply affected by levels of poverty as well as gender. Strategic gender interests are those that relate to the structure and nature of the relationships between men and women. They are concerned with how women's status is impacted upon by hierarchical gender relations. Strategic gender interests are more closely linked to the processes and definitions of empowerment as discussed in Chapter Two. This abstract division of interests has been criticised for imposing a hierarchisation of women's interests which serves to marginalise certain groups of women, specifically poor Third World women, and their demands (Marchand, 1995). Neither are these interests so easily separated in reality. A positive change in women's strategic interests is likely to lead to an improved situation regarding their practical

interests. Likewise, women improving their practical interests can be a route through which the process of empowerment and a heightened awareness of strategic interests comes about. Despite the difficulty associated with being able to neatly separate practical and strategic gender interests on the ground they remain useful categories for the purposes of analysis and understanding.

Most usually NGO workers did not separate out these different aims as this quote typifies:

> 'We started the *mahila sangathan*s because in this area the women and children are in a very bad condition. Because the bad conditions and the culture and social structure and so they can't express themselves. To solve their problems we started the *mahila sangathan*s.... Like there is no participation of women in taking decisions, even about their health. Like how many children they want, if they want to be sterilised, if they want to send their daughter's to school or not, how much money they will spend on their household issues.' *Woman NGO worker*

This woman clearly makes links between women's constructed role in society, a strategic interest, and their poor health situation, a practical interest. In certain areas, particularly health, the link is not always acknowledged. Instead, it was common to hear that women's poor health status is a symptom of their position in biological reproduction and can, therefore, be solved by means of practical interventions, that could be instigated through the formation of a *mahila sangathan*:

> 'The main aim is health awareness in women. If we register pregnant women, then it is our responsibility to give medication and vaccinations to pregnant women, during pregnancy and after delivery. And there are proper vaccinations for the children until they are six years old. We give contraceptives to help space their children.' *Woman NGO worker*

To a certain degree all the NGO workers I spoke with saw a role for the *sangathans* in challenging an inequitable gender hierarchy. Most usually exactly how the formation of the *sangathans* was going to do this was not made clear. Nevertheless, one employee, whose primary interest for a long time had been gender issues, did explain how she felt this would work:

> 'From the beginning we have been working on how to change roles in society. We made groups of women so that it would help to change their role in society. In every type of work like education and health.... You can see that through small examples. When the women come out they cross the doorway. They leave their thinking behind them; they come out to the meetings and sit there. Maybe they have their *ghunghat*, but it is the first

challenge for the men that they leave their houses. It did not happen previously, because men always had a role in the decision making process, always, and they are dominant. The first challenge for them is when the women come out and have their own meeting. And the women they struggled to come out, it is a big struggle in the male dominated areas, this is their primary win you could say.' *Management level woman NGO worker*

In regard to women's participation in *Panchayati Raj* institutions it is argued that women's strategic interests will be improved, by the rise in status accorded them due to holding political office. It is believed that their practical concerns will be met because women will prioritise certain things seen to be important for improving their own and their communities well-being such as health care, water provisions, education facilities and other social development works.

> 'The government gives education facilities and health facilities. But they do not reach women, so when they start work [on the *panchayats*] they will ensure that their facilities are in the village.... Like in the village if a school is closed they don't know where to go or where they can say about that. So when the government gives them rights, when the government gives them rights in the *panchayats* they will able to sort out these types of problems. Like construction work everybody is running for that but health and education they just sit silently and the women's issues and the development work nobody raises their voices about those things.' *Woman NGO worker*

4.2.1 Why Participate? Participation for Survival

This section discuses why women *sangathan* members choose to participate. I argue that their primary motivation for not only becoming but continuing to be involved and conforming to the exigencies of the NGO has been to promote their own and their families' practical needs.

The benefits women receive come in the form of health care, loans and paid employment as well as emergency and more long-term aid. The selection of quotes below illustrate that ensuring receipt of these was of uppermost concern to the *sangathan members:*

> 'We heard that we'd get something, that we'd get houses. They would start some work or provide some help, so we joined the *sangathan*.' *Older sangathan member*

> 'We get medicine and sometimes we get seeds for the agricultural work on behalf of the *sangathan*.... The facility of the goat and the sheep and the medicine nothing else.... We didn't think about ourselves. We collect ten rupees in each meeting and this is our saving nothing else.' *Long standing Sangathan member in her mid thirties*

The resistance faced by both NGO workers and the women themselves to the establishment of the *mahila sangathans* provides an explanation as to why there was initially such a strong focus on practical interests. Would it have been possible, even if it had been desirable, to establish *mahila sangathans* in these villages without providing immediate practical gains for the women and their families? Would it have been desirable? The quotes below point to how by providing material benefits women's participation become acceptable to their families:

> 'The women decided who would get the drought relief work.... Men feel happy because there is some benefit in their homes.' *40 year old sangathan member's son.*

> 'Then the villagers said they will sell all the women of the village. We made a *sangathan* and we brought work for the members of the *sangathan*, machines for making clothes, then loans for goats.... Then my family members said going out does bring some profit, then the villagers believed and my brother also believed.' *Elderly sangathan member who lives in her pihar.*

> 'Everyone joined.... the daughters-in-law they don't come much.... Their husbands used to say "why do you go out?" and "why do you speak to others?" and "why do you open your faces?" and "the other people will not say good things, and they will say that you are bad women. You are the daughter of this village so it is OK if you go but they are the daughters-in-law. They should keep their veils and they should not go, because people are going to say things about them, but not about you".... Sometimes they use to come to the organisation. They used to come and fight in the organisation. They used to go to the organisation and say "why do you call these women?" and this type of thing. Then the work started in the forest department. Then they thought oh some money is coming and then they stopped.' *Intermittent sangathan member in her early thirties who lives in her pihar*

Examining the reasons for opposition to the establishment of the *sangathans* also offers interesting insights into both attitudes towards 'outsiders' and the perceived need to protect women within the constraints of different levels of *purdah*. A woman's personal characteristics and relationships in addition to her position in the village and in her family greatly affected how much opposition she faced. The founding members of the *sangathan* are all either elderly women, women who live in their *pihar* or in the occasional example of a younger woman, her in-laws had died. Related to this is the commonly recounted fear that women who associated with the URMUL Trust would be taken to the cities and sold by the NGO workers, as were fears that women would get lost if they left the village.

'Because I am sharper than the other members, everyone said that when they sell me they will sell me for Rs. 4000. (*Everyone laughing*). Because I am younger than Mohani *bai* and Rohini *bai,* they are older, so everyone said that if I am sold then they will give Rs.4000 for me.' *Long standing sangathan member in her mid thirties*

'When the organisation started we thought "what is this?" and we thought some people came from the cities and they will take our women and they will sell them there. So we sent our aged ladies to the organisation....Because they didn't know about Urmul Trust and Urmul Trust's work, the villagers didn't have confidence in Urmul Trust. Selling and buying this is just kidding it is not the actual thing. After introduction there is no problem.' *Middle-aged sangathan members son*

'Earlier they used to say that these white people will come and they'll take you all with them away and sell you. (*Researcher:* white people?! but Preetiji and Sandeepji [NGO workers]are not white?). But foreigners also came with them. They said again that the English will rule and they will come and they will sell you. They used to say that they again are going to rule over us and they are going to take you.' *Older sangathan member who lives in her pihar*

The notion that the women would be taken away and sold was neither said in complete seriousness or purely as a joke. I hesitate to speculate as to where this idea may have originated, nevertheless, I believe it is analogous to the fear that without protection from either conjugal or natal family women are constantly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

NGO workers describe the difficulties they had faced when they first came to work in particular villages, especially those faced by women workers. Obstacles and insults directed towards women were often in relation to their sexual conduct as the quote below illustrates:

'We had to spread the objectives of URMUL, so we went to the villages and talked to the women and others. In the beginning they were suspicious of us and they thought, "who are you? Why are you here? What is your work? What do you want to hear?" Sometimes also the women would accuse us of coming just to do *dunda* (prostitution). We said "if we are here just for *dunda* you don't have that much money. If that is what we wanted to do we would do it in the cities". We had to build up their trust in us, but slowly we gave our names and addresses and some villagers came to my *sasural* and my *pihar* to investigate, to see if Preetiji is a woman, if she is a liar or not. They came here [Bikaner] to find out about me. So slowly we built up their trust.' *Management level woman NGO worker*

This quote also demonstrates how it was necessary for workers to prove their 'insider' status. As a woman this worker had to show that she met culturally required norms of

social behaviour. Principally that she was married and had a *pihar – sasural* relationship.

There is in most of the villages I worked in a justifiable suspicion of 'outsiders'.[2] Although difficult to define precisely who is seen as an 'outsider' it certainly includes anyone who is from outside of Rajasthan, and may also include some urban middle-class Rajasthanis. My own experience of being a very obvious 'outsider' was the way in which I learnt who an 'outsider' was seen to be and what the arrival of an 'outsider' meant to the villagers. I would on occasion be told that someone like me had come to the village, but this would in fact be someone from another state in India. The position of my research assistant, Monika, was far more ambiguous. Consequently, when discussing certain issues Monika and I were seen by villagers to have more in common than Monika and the village women we were with. However, particularly as people grew to know Monika better and know about her children and her own *pihar – sasural* relationship, village women would at times identify Monika with themselves and as different to me, while at other times continue to see both of us as similar and different to them.[3]

In villages where contact with non governmental agencies and organisations had been minimal or non-existent residents were more suspicious of both Monika and I to begin with. On some occasions we were asked if we were from the Indian government come to check up on the village in some way. In villages in which NGOs had been working for a long time there was more of an assumption that we were there to give, in some capacity. 'Outsiders' defined as urban, wealthy and foreign are perceived both as a threat and a resource, but always perceived as powerful.

The obstacles, faced by both village women and women NGO workers led to material benefits gained through participation in the *sangathan* being seen as the most effective way to overcome resistance to its formation and made the *sangathan* acceptable among women's families and the wider community. This deliberate strategy was something

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[2] Why I say this is justifiable is due to for example, memories and experiences of the forced sterilisation campaigns during the emergency, relationships between villagers and government officials and middle men who buy their goods as well as experiences of banditry and theft committed by outsiders.

[3] See Bagwe (1995), Karim (1993) and Parameswaran (1997) for discussions on ethnographers' positionality when researching in their own countries. For a position on women as a category sharing certain experiences across cultures see Bell (1993). For a more generalised discussion on insider and outsider dynamics see Reay (1996).

which was acknowledged as having been used by a number of NGO workers who I spoke with.

This strategy has, however, created some long term difficulties in terms of sustainability and achieving goals of empowerment. I now look in more detail at a specific activity undertaken by one of the *mahila saganthans* in or to examine paying women for their participation and address the reasons why a radical action on the part of this *sangathan* has proven to be unsustainable.

4.2.2 Why Participate? Examining The Contradictions

During my fieldwork it was always difficult to discover a clear and succinct account of a particular event: to find out what <u>really</u> happened. The stories I was told are multi-layered and full of contradictions, with different informants emphasising different aspects and ignoring others. Written accounts are few and simply present yet another story to the oral accounts. This challenge in itself reflects the multiple perceptions and understandings that are revealed through different accounts of the same happening by different actors in and witnesses to these events: a multiplicity of truths are told. It is not necessarily that the recipients of NGO interventions told different stories to those who worked for the NGO. Instead, different NGO workers told different stories to one another and likewise the recipients of their interventions provided different accounts of the same event. What was noticeable though was that NGO workers felt that their stories were the true account of events and that if I wanted to know what happened I should ask them first.

Despite these difficulties what is clear is that the *mahila sangathan* gained permission to plant trees and vegetables on a plot of land owned by the Forestry Department. Lots of women were involved in actually working the land but only a few women from the *sangathan* were taken along when the NGO workers negotiated access to this land with the authorities. There had been quite a struggle with both the authorities and other villagers to be able to work on this land as the quote below makes clear:

> 'Then we roamed and found this forest department land. We went to the *tehsil*. The forest
> department asked us where is the land... We told them the land is near our homes and they
> said no there is no such land. The people of the village started, they started saying those
> women are going to snatch the land of the village... the whole village used to say... *Sahb*
> [secretary of URMUL Trust] told us to start working on this land, we started making the
> boundaries.... Back then they [villagers] didn't come we used to keep axes in our hands.

Sahb told us don't get beaten, you should beat them, but don't you get beaten. So we used to run after them with out axes. At night the *patwarri* would come and make a boundary and in the morning we would destroy that boundary.... For three years we planted trees and the villagers didn't say anything. We used to fill the *diggi* (water tank, part of IGNP irrigation system) with water and we used to give it to the plants' *Long standing elderly sangathan member*

These events had started nearly a decade before I began my fieldwork, and lasted for between three and five years, depending on who is telling the story. This area was the first place I was taken to in the village by the *sangathan* members as a group. It was a desolate place at this time at the beginning of the hot season with expanses of sand, a few trees but mainly just the stumps of trees which had been cut down and the empty, out of use, *diggi*. I repeatedly tried to find out what had happened, from the women's perspective, why it all had gone wrong. This was one woman's story:

'There was a fair in another village, far away from here. So while the organisation members were attending the fair the villagers sent their animals to our land, they destroyed the vegetables we grew on that land, peas, cucumber, watermelon, tomato, chilli. When we were at the fair they sent their animals to destroy everything.... After everything had been destroyed we went back to the *Tehsil Dar* and all the other officials and we invited them to see our loss. They sent us to one official and another official but nobody can do anything for us, so we sat down'. *Long standing middle-aged sangathan member*

But what was never made clear was why the women no longer struggled to maintain this land. It had obviously been important to them; an important activity in establishing the *sangathan*. Three reasons were given to me. The first is related to a relationship of dependency between the *sangathan* and the Trust. The second is that the unity among the women themselves broke down. Both of these are discussed in a broader context in Chapter Seven and so I will not dwell on them here.

A third reason relates to the way different actors in the event interpret it. Those that worked for the NGO generally presented it as a successful event in which their *sangathan* had battled with the authorities and won out: a demonstration of the potential for women's empowerment. Poor rural women had fought against government authorities and powerful elements in their own village. Some of the women had probably felt about it like this, at some point as well, but most are more despondent now and had given up on ever working it again. Every now and then someone would

express the desire to fight again, but this generally came with a reason why this wasn't possible.

One of the alternative pictures of this event presented to me was that it was nothing more than a way to earn an income:

> 'So what can the *sangathan* do by being powerful? We don't have money. At that time *sahb* used to give us money. Now we don't get any money for it so what will we do while sitting there?' *Long standing elderly sangathan member*

> 'Trust people told them [the women *sangathan* members] that this is your land and you can grow vegetables and fruits on this land. They used to give them Rs30 per day and they did the work and then they stopped giving money and they [the women] stopped the work.' *Longstanding but intermittent sangathan member in her early thirties, who lives in her pihar*

Although no longer receiving wages is not the only reason for the disintegration of this project it was often cited. This was true of other projects that had started in other villages. For many women particularly those who were less involved in the battle to secure access to the land their primary motivation was the daily wage they were paid. They cited the fact that no one would pay them to work on the land anymore as a major disincentive.

The way in which different *sangathan* members and those who work for the NGO interpret these events differs greatly. Similarly, very few of the women could actually tell me much about what had happened, further indicating that the women members of the *sangathan* have a narrower interpretation of what the project was about.

This example illustrates how perceptions of an activity are influenced by the way in which women were motivated to become involved and how their families are motivated to 'allow' them to become involved. It demonstrates how meeting practical needs, particularly when this is not sustainable over the long term, can detract from underlying objectives. Encouraging participation through the use of material incentives runs the risk of material gains becoming women's primary if not sole rationale for being part of the group. Participation becomes something that women do for the NGO in order that their families secure material benefits. As a consequence more strategic concerns can become sidelined. Rao, Stuart and Kelleher (1999: 43) found a similar phenomenon when researching BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) in that the

imperatives of securing credit were becoming dominant over the initial objectives of social change. Ackerley (1997) also researching credit programmes in Bangladesh, whose stated aim is women's empowerment, points to the difficulties encountered in achieving this aim when empowerment competes with other priorities. She argues that "Empowerment cannot be the presumed result of credit" (ibid: 156). Similarly, empowerment cannot be the presumed result of participation in women's groups.

Further, when patriarchal objections to women having freedom of association are pacified through a process of appeasement, this association rather than challenging or causing a shift in gender relations becomes subsumed within existing gender norms. As was discussed in Chapter Three women's mobility, even that of daughters-in-law, is acceptable if it is for work and household survival. Many of the practical concerns dealt with by the *sangathans*, beyond directly paying women for their labour, lie in the realm of women's traditional reproductive responsibilities. Consequently, the gendered division of labour may in fact be reinforced rather than challenged.

4.3 Why Participate? How Much Choice Do Some Women Have?

A comprehensive discussion of the different reasons given for particular women's participation in *Panchayati Raj* Institutions is provided in Chapter Six. In this chapter, however, I discuss women's reluctance and fear of taking up such political positions. It was not uncommon for them to go as far as saying they had been forced in to their position. They felt that their family or community had made them stand for election as the quotes below demonstrate:

> 'I was not interested in standing but my husband he forced me saying whether we win or lose you should stand. He made me, he insisted that I do it.' *Former Nayak woman sarpanch in her early to mid fifties*

> 'I refused, because I am not able to go out from my house. But they forced me they insisted that I stand for election.' *Former Rajput woman ward panch in her mid thirties*

Some women did, in time, adapt to their position and feel a sense of pride in holding office. Others remained unenthusiastic and even distressed by it:

> 'The *sarpanch* told us, [to stand for election] he told the whole family.... I was frightened, but they said we'll give you money we'll give you a house, we'll give you work. I was

scared because basically it is party[4] work. This is not a united village.' *Current young Sansi woman ward panch*

'I never wanted to be a *ward panch* but they gave it to me so I am sitting. Now I have to finish five years, but I don't think I can, because people are on my back and against me. I didn't become *ward panch* because I wanted to.... The villagers made me.... Now I am not happy everybody is abusing me. My health is not good, I feel like I am going to fall down. Everybody is abusing me from here and there. So what is there to like?' *Current young Jat woman ward panch*

These quotes exemplify the lack of decision-making power these women felt they had in becoming political representatives. Rather than being an empowering experience it reaffirmed their sense of vulnerability. The feelings of powerlessness illustrated in these quotes are common among women *panchayat* representatives. This coupled with working within the context of a system which is perceived to be highly corrupt, rather than leading to feelings of confidence and self-worth leads to feelings of fear and despondency. It must in addition be noted that the vast majority of women who are becoming political representatives within the system of quotas for women in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions have not been either part of the struggle for quotas for women or even aware of it. Chapter Six discusses decisions around women becoming representatives in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions in further detail.

These negative consequences faced by individual women due to their participation in politics is rarely discussed in the literature or acknowledged in the discourses surrounding the pros and cons of quota systems. An NGO worker, who has been involved in training women *panchayat* representatives, recognises this issue but defended putting women in this difficult position:

'I agree with it [the quota for women] personally I agree with it. I want to give you an example, after marriage a girl's responsibilities change. She has a husband and children and her husband and her do different things. But if she loses her husband he dies or something, she can run the family she earns for the family she takes care of the kids. How is it possible? It is possible. Due to the situation that was in front of her, she develops from that situation because she has to and secondly there is social pressure. So I think the reservation is the same situation. 33% has been given to women by force.... They are forced to or might be willing. It is a chance for them to enhance their role otherwise in the way we are working it is not possible to find that much change. Her husband dies, it is a

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[4] In this context she is not referring to political parties but to rival factions within the village.

loss for her it is a bad thing, but it is also a positive thing in the context of the reservation.'

Management level NGO worker

The metaphor used in this quote rests on the infinite ability of women to adapt to difficult circumstances, to ensure survival at all costs. The only test being whether they can succeed or not rather than what benefit it brings to them or women more generally.

4.4 Why Women Should Participate: Women Are Better At Development

A common perception exists among the NGO workers, among others, in the area of my fieldwork that women are more efficient in terms of participating for social development and as carriers of social development to the community. Battiwala and Dhanraj (2004:11-12) identify this perception as a widely held 'myth' at both the national and international level:

> '[P]oor women are now considered the best economic and political investment... . Poor women are now seen as harder working, easier to mobilise, better credit risks, more selfless because they are concerned with their entire families and communities, more loyal voters, the best anti corruption vigilantes, and the best agents to uplift their families and communities'.

This section examines the rationale for this perception and the discourse which it informs. It investigates the implications of this discourse for women's empowerment in the context of participatory women's organisations and local politics.

It considers this in relation to the *sangathans,* principally by exploring the justification of primarily working with *sangathans* made up of women rather than men or mixed sex groups. It then examines these perceptions of women's capacities in relation to the *panchayats.* I focus on perceptions in regard to women and corruption in this part. Consequently, it is necessary to begin the discussion with an exploration of attitudes towards corruption in general and perceived levels of corruption within the *panchayat* system. My research did not investigate actual levels of corruption within the *panchayat* system in general or levels of corruption that were taking place in the villages where I conducted the research.

4.4.1 Women Are Better At Participation: Participation As Efficiency

In the villages, where I studied *mahila sangathans,* URMUL Trust had initially established what are either described as a people's *sangathans* or a men's *sangathans.*

Now only the women's *sangathan* remains in Bhanpura[5]. In Ramtek there still exists a *sangathan* for men, but more emphasis is put on the women's *sangathan* by the Trust.[6] What is apparent from not only the obvious longevity of the women's *sangathans* in comparison to the men's but also from the Trust's literature and speaking to NGO workers is that the women's *sangathans* are recognised to be more successful and sustainable than either men's or mixed groups. It is indeed now the stated objective of URMUL Setu to only organise women's groups in new villages as they are 'more effective in the development context' (Urmul Trust 1999c: 3).

The reasons given for focusing development assistance through women's groups can be divided into three sets of interrelated reasons. First, women are more dedicated and work harder, second, women are easier to work with and third, men are more negatively influenced by outside forces.

Women are seen as more dedicated and harder working because they are perceived to be in-corruptible and altruistic in their actions as the quotes that follow illustrate:

> 'Women don't have anything in their hearts. Men get information from the market and from outside, like corruption and everything, but the women only think for their families and they do the work in this way, honestly, they think for the village.... The men always think for their own lives and women naturally think about the family and others. Any resource women find they use it for their families. Like for generations we have seen this type of atmosphere around. They also have a kind of sadness and those kinds of problems so they already understand that kind of sadness and those kinds of problems, so they are not able to be wicked.' *Woman NGO worker.*

This NGO worker's perspective that women are more altruistic because of their role in the family is commonly asserted. It is assumed that women's reproductive role in the household extends to a more caring attitude toward the rest of the community. Likewise, they are seen to have a greater sense of responsibility:

> 'The men didn't want to deposit their loans back but in the women's *sangathans* they are still depositing their loans and the interest.... In the women's *sangathan* it is their mentality that they want to give the money back but in the men's *sangathan* they want to grab the things, they are not interested in carrying on.... I think it is because the women think it is their responsibility.' *Male NGO worker.*

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[5] All village names have been changed throughout the thesis.
[6] Interestingly Ramtek's men's *sangathan* does have one woman member, who is both elderly and a daughter of the village. Due to this status she had joined the men's *sangathan* prior to there being a separate organisation for women. While her savings are in the men's *sangathan* account she fully participates in the activities of the women's *sangathan.*

Not only are women seen as more committed to community development but also as more efficient disseminators of knowledge to the community. Men are presented as selfish with information and not willing to share any knowledge they gain with women, and possibly other members, of their families. Contrary to this women are seen to share information, they are presented as going home after the meetings and telling their male family members what happens, what they learn and what is discussed. Consequently, giving information to women is seen as the most efficient way of communicating the development goals of the Trust to the rest of the community:

> 'We also found that if a man attends the meetings he never tells his wife when he goes back
> to the house. But if in the women's meeting we discuss an issue she goes back to her house
> and she discusses the issue of the meeting with her husband. She gives all the information
> to him as well, but the men don't do that.' *Male NGO worker*

> 'We don't force the women to tell the things to their families. We give the women
> information about what are the disadvantages of early marriage, but it is not possible that
> they will go to their families and they will not talk to their husbands they will definitely talk
> to their husbands and they will tell them what the disadvantages of early marriages are and
> so on. So in this way they [men] get knowledge. Indirectly they get knowledge.' *Woman
> NGO worker*

This final reason why women are seen as more efficient at development is highly problematic and contradicts other opinions expressed regarding gender relations in the family. On the one hand women are seen as not having a right to voice in their conjugal families and as having limited decision making power. On the other hand women are seen to be the best communicators of knowledge to the rest of the family. Is it that it is only a certain type of knowledge women are seen to be good at disseminating: knowledge which relates to their gender prescribed roles in the family? How much power women have in actually instigating this new-found knowledge is explored in Chapter Five.

Some NGO workers admit that one motivation for working with women rather than men is because it is simply easier to do. Reasons given for this include women's greater levels of compliance: they ask fewer questions and demand fewer rewards for their participation:

> 'I think it is easy or we are more comfortable to motivate women in society. Really, really
> I'm honestly saying in comparison to the men we can convince the women easily and I

think they also take care of the work they get. If we give work or anything, if they commit to anything they do it – the women.' *Management level NGO worker*

'In the beginning we made a men's *sangathan* in every village but we found that their learning capacity and their patience is far less in comparison to women. When we explained our new plans and new things the men started laughing at us; they don't take us seriously. Like we are planning for the *Tehsil Manch* [sub-district level organisation] and we want to do this and this plan, but they start laughing at us and they don't take us seriously.... So they are not ready to learn.' *Male NGO worker.*

'The men were uncontrolled so the men's *sangathan* failed but the women's is still going.' *Women NGO worker*

I dispute the idea that women are necessarily more compliant and provide evidence for this in Chapter Seven. However, women do in certain ways have more to gain from becoming members of village *sangathans* than men. As is discussed in Chapter Three women's mobility, even in the villages in which they live, is extremely curtailed, as such the *sangathan* meetings offer them an opportunity, especially for younger women, to socialise and escape the confines of their homes. Even when the *mahila sangathan* members complained about the way they felt the Trust was treating them and the changes in the relationship between themselves and the Trust, I got the sense that they still enjoyed the opportunity to come together at meetings and feel part of something.

As explored in the previous section of this chapter, there are many obstacles to overcome in establishing women's groups in Rajasthan. However, there are also difficulties to overcome when working with groups of men, which are presented as more difficult to deal with. These are always explained as being related to class and caste power dynamics. NGO personnel explain that because men have far more interaction in the public sphere they are more affected by caste and class dynamics and intra-village conflicts. Such difficulties are given as the reason for not working with groups of low caste and *dalit* men. Overcoming gender and generational difficulties around women's involvement is seen as possible, whereas the class and caste dilemmas involved in working with men are presented insurmountable:

'The problems are mainly because our focus is on the deprived community and leadership. But power is in the upper caste community. The upper caste community when they see these deprived persons unite, they play every game to break them and because... [poor, low caste men's] whole business is going on only through these [upper caste] people, in these communities, maybe they are agricultural labourers or maybe they are the buyers of their goods that sort of thing.... There is a conflict between the high income and low income

groups between the caste groups. But with the women there is not so much (conflict).'
Management level Male NGO worker

'The men are influenced by the powerful people from the village and they misguide them.... Like in the male *sangathan* it is always in the powerful persons hands. So lots of times the men's *sangathan* make up and break up.' *Management level male NGO worker*

It was also expressed that when women break with social norms it maybe the men in their families who suffer, and this again is because of their greater mobility in public spaces:

'I can't believe in men in society because so many factors affect men's mentality, especially the poor man's mentality.... If a man is sending his wife to *sangathan* meeting and he is travelling on the bus or he is sitting in the village shop the rest of the community, other men will definitely comment on his wife. "Oh she has become a leader now", "He is sending her to become a leader", this type of thing. It affects the mentality of men particularly. And then as he goes home, he reacts, there is an argument. So this type of atmosphere also affects the mentality of men.' *Management level male NGO worker*

When I probed further with this informant as to why women face less class and caste harassment, even when they start to enter the public realm he explained it in terms of there being less interaction between low and high caste women.

'Even in the *panchayat*, even in the distribution of the government development work you can see the difference the men in low castes will be harassed and disappointed by the officers they can't do the same with the women, because they are more vocal than the men. More vocal so. If you see the case of Rohini Bai this family and the others they are vocal in the fight.... In Sui village also all the men were very much conscious of the *Thakur Sabhs* [land owners – traditional powerful elite in Rajasthani villages], but the women can oppose them. Women can fight for their farm they can fight. The men can say OK we can't come into direct conflict with the *Thakur sabh* that type of fear is there.'

This quote also illustrates the general consensus that women, though not stated meaning older women, are more capable of standing up to powerful members of the village and to government officials. It is common to hear that women are less harassed by government officials and powerful elites. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter Seven.

It is acknowledged by this NGO worker that the pressure men face from these outside forces may impact upon women in the context of the household. However, in the main it is rarely acknowledge that any kind of conflict may be caused within individual families or households, due to women's participation in the *sangathans*. Whereas caste

and class dynamics are recognised as conflictual, dangerous and destructive, gender relations in the household are presented as benign. This is discussed in more detail in the Chapter which follows.

The emphasis on women's participation for efficiency can lead to a situation in which women's empowerment becomes about empowering women enough to participate. This was expressed to me by Bina *bai*, a young *Rajput* woman with seven children who lives in her *pihar* who has been an intermittent member of the *mahila sangathan* in her village:

> 'I've travelled a lot and those women have not travelled and so they (URMUL Trust) were trying to make them more aware, taking them to places so that they would become more intelligent. So earlier the women used to remain like this, in *ghunghat*. When anyone used to come into the house they never spoke. Now they don't wear *ghunghat* in front of URMUL people, they just wear *ghunghat* in the village and in front of the village people. And they speak to them (URMUL workers), earlier they used not to speak to them.'

Rather than focusing on change in other aspects of the women's lives the efficiency rationale leads to a change in women's ability to participate in itself becoming both the measure of and the focus for women's empowerment.

4.5 The Culture of Corruption

The perception that women will be more just and selfless in managing *panchayat* affairs and that they will not take part in corruption is a commonly held opinion. It was beyond the scope of my research to investigate actual allegations of corruption and how true or not they may have been or to make any assessment of the extent to which corruption exists within the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions.[7] Instead I am concerned with the culture of corruption: the way in which people talk about, accept and expect corruption to exist; people's perceptions of corruption.[8]

Corruption is perceived to be the norm in *Panchayati Raj* institutions. This was most clearly illustrated to me by small everyday comments that people made. For example

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[7] For example Mayaram cites that for *tehsil* (sub-distrcit)level bureaucracy the cut on any payment for permanent works is ten percent for government officials.

[8] Parry (2000) provides a very interesting discussion around perceptions of retail corruption, for instance the paying of bribes to secure public sector employment, in Madhya Pradesh. He does not deny the prevalence of corruption but suspects there to be a great deal of hyperbole in the way it is spoken about. This very hyperbole and the acceptance of corruption in everyday life, Parry suggests, not only sustains the payments of bribes but potentially increases levels of corruption, 'the belief that corruption is all-pervasive can all too easily turn into the reality' (ibid. 53).

when asking a man *ward panch* about when meetings happened in the village and where I could find the *sarpanch* an adolescent boy standing near by said 'he won't tell you anything the *sarpanch* will have paid him to keep quiet'. On another occasion a woman *sarpanch* showed me some furniture in her house and explained, 'we got all of this since I became *sarpanch*'. The furniture was filing cabinets and the like that had been taken from the *panchayat* office. It was obvious that she felt as *sarpanch* she had an automatic right to help herself to the office furniture. On talking to a couple of women about a *sarpanch* in another village who had been arrested for corruption they simple said the same will happen to our *sarpanch*. The husband of an *upsarpanch (deputy sarpanch)* said to me in regard to the *gram sevak (panchayat secretary)*:

'He is meant to look after the village but the village looks after him.'

A woman *ward panch* told me:

'Every *sarpanch* gets a little bit of [financial] benefit but they do not give anything to us.'

This husband of a former *ward panch* explained the level of corruption more directly:

'In the *panchayat* also if three *lakhs* (300,000 rupees) are sanctioned for some work then only one *lakh* will be used for the work and the rest they will keep for themselves.'

On another occasion I actually witnessed an act of fraud going on between a woman *sarpanch's* husband and the *patwari* (government officer responsible for land allocation and taxation). It was *panchayat* meeting day in one of the villages that I worked in. After waiting for over an hour at the *panchayat* offices for the meeting to start, with every villager we spoke to telling us that, 'the meetings don't happen in this village' or 'the meetings only happen at the *sarpanch's* house', we walked out to the *sarpanch's* farm to try and find out what was going on. Both the *sarpanch* and her husband were out so we sat and talked to her son. He told us that he helps his parents with the *panchayat* records and that he was working out how much the *panchayat* needed to pay the labourers who had worked on a particular project in the village. Eventually his parents returned with the *patwari*. We sat and drank tea with them all and I explained my research to the *patwari*, who I had not met before. Shortly afterwards the *sarpanch* disappeared into another room so I sat and asked questions of the *patwari* about his job and his responsibilities. After a while we went to find the *sarpanch* again and after speaking to her for a while we decided to leave. As we were saying our goodbyes to the children I looked back into the room and saw both the *patwari* and the *sarpanch*'s

husband repeatedly putting their own thumbprints down the side of a muster role[9]. It was not the fact that they were defrauding the muster roles that was surprising, I had been told that this was a common way in which *sarpanches* and government officials supplemented their incomes, it was that they were doing it so blatantly with two virtual strangers at their home.

These are just a sample of the experiences I had in relation to corruption in *Panchayat* system. They are not isolated events, instead it was rare that I would conduct an interview or talk to anyone about the *panchayat Raj* system without the issue of corruption being raised either directly or indirectly. I also feel it is important to note, in order to illustrate not only the normalisation of and widespread nature of corruption, the number of cases of corruption that had been lodged with the police in the villages I worked in during the time of my research.

In Kekri village as is described in detail below the former *sarpanch* had had a first incidence report (FIR) lodged against her for defrauding muster rolls. In Bilinasar village the man *sarpanch* in the next door *panchayat* had been arrested but it was unclear on what charge. According to the people I spoke to they believed he had been framed anyway by those who he had won the election against. The woman *Sarpanch* of Lunkaransar had an FIR lodged against her shortly after I left India again on corruption charges. These charges have been brought by other members of the *panchayat*.

The positive side to all this is that despite the widespread normalisation, expectance and to a degree acceptance of corruption, there are charges being brought against some corrupt representatives.[10] However, as the stories regarding Mohani *Devi* below illustrate corruption charges are also used in political games.

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[9] Muster rolls are used to list the names and payment details of villagers who have worked on construction projects under the auspices of the *panchayat*. After receiving their wages labourers sign these documents. With high levels of illiteracy particularly among casual labourers people commonly use their thumbprints as the way to sign for receipt of earning.

[10] There have been significant advances made over the last decade regarding transparency and accountability in political and administrative institutions in Rajasthan, for example a right to information act was passed in Rajasthan in 2000, giving all citizens the right to photocopies of documents related to public spending and so forth. Most of the credit for these advances is due to the efforts of the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS) a non affiliated political organisation who have used the forum of public hearings on development expenditure to expose the corrupt nature of local political institutions and bureaucracies. Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of my thesis to discuss the work of this organisation. For further information please see Goetz and Jenkins (2001; 2002) Roy (1997), Transparency Bulletin of the Right to Information Movement

4.5.1 Attitudes Towards Women and Corruption

My shock at the normalisation and expectance of corruption was perhaps only matched by my shock at how widespread the belief is that women were practically incapable of committing corrupt acts. Below are three quotes to exemplify this believe:

> 'They [men politicians] don't allow women to come up as they [the men] want to grab the money. They [women] think for the children and they think for the family and they are soft inside... the woman still thinks not only for her children but also for others. As you know women are still more religious and they have soft corners, so they believe in fasting, lets do something for society so they want to help the poor people they want to help others.... I'll give you a good example, like the women don't do the fast with that thought, that if I do not eat my food which will go to others. But still in India fifty percent of women fast so when they fast they are saving grain, this will ultimately helps others.' *Management level male NGO worker*

> 'In my point of view honesty will definitely come [with a women's quota on the *panchayats*]. I don't know why it is in my mind but I think that where women are honesty comes.... I want to give you another example like if somebody comes from a poor family so he or she can understand their problems. If somebody comes from the rich family they will not understand the problems of the poor. And the women are never dishonest in exchanging money – she never did it in her *pihar* and she never does it in her *sasural* family.' *Management level male NGO worker*

> 'Women still do not know about systematic corruption, they have not been taught that. They don't learn that systematic thing because they are not given decision-making responsibility and men earn money and men make most of the decisions.... Because she is always honest towards everybody and she never even questions her husband, so basically she is honest. So when she is in the *panchayat* she wants to work for the community for the *panchayat*.... And the second thing is some natural thing in her, due to this she still can't do that [corruption]. By *nature* she doesn't have fraud and dishonesty in her behaviour. Because she has sensitivity for others so she can't eat someone else's money, the money for others.' *Management level woman NGO worker*

The quotes above provide the general consensus of reasons as to why women were seen to be incapable of corruption. First, women are not corrupt due to natural innate qualities, second, due to their position in the family they are not inclined to be dishonest and third, they don't know the workings of the system well enough to be able to be corrupt.

The biological determinist argument is easy to counter. The argument that women's position in their families makes them more honest seems to be based in the stereotype of the self-sacrificing Indian wife and mother. [11] However, a woman's position in her *sasural* family and village would make it necessary that any form of money making corruption be done with the support if not incentive coming from other members of her family. The third reason given as to why women may be less corrupt, that they do not know how to take advantage of the system, and are not familiar with political mechanisms, is the most credible. Datta (1998: 118-9) supports this view point while she reports that corruption was not found or reported in any of the all women *panchayats* that were studied. She disputes the argument that this is due to women's 'purer nature' and argues that it is due to the reality that they simply do not know the system well enough to take advantage of opportunities to be corrupt. Due to women's lack of formal education and political literacy they are often simply not as good at being corrupt as their experienced male counterparts. This compounded by the fact that a lot of corrupt politics, as with politics in general, is conducted in spaces which women are excluded from. In the village this may be sitting round the *choki* (central meeting place in a village usually under a tree, where men spend time socialising) in conversation at home with the *gram sevak* or *patwari,* who are almost all male, or sitting in a teashop.

Not only are these perspectives on women's potential to be corrupt held by those working with women *panchayat* representatives, they were also purported by those directly involved with the *panchayats* and by some members of the populations living under panchayat governance. It was less common to hear rural women *panchayat* members, their families and their communities stating the impossibility of women's corruption due to natural capacities instead their lack of aptitude for corruption if talked about was related to their gendered position in society. This I suspect again is related to the essentialising of poor rural women. Poor, rural women are far less likely to present themselves in such one dimensional ways. Nevertheless, this common acceptance of the incorruptibility of women is used to defend them against any possible charges of corruption. Women would present themselves and be presented by their families and communities as too innocent to know that there are corrupt acts happening and so forth.

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[11] The ideal of the self sacrificing wife and mother has been present in constructions of Indian femininity since at least the struggle for independence. These attributes were indeed used as the justification for or necessary qualification for women's involvement in politics at this time. (See: Chatterjee, 1989, 1990, 1993; Fox, 1996; Jayawardena, 1986; Kandiyoti, 1991; Kumar, 1993 and Sen, 1993.)

Often when I was first meeting with a particular woman *panchayat* representative and their families, or when I was new to the village it was common to hear statements like "I/she can't read", "she is innocent (meaning not knowing)" and "I only go to meetings to sign my name when I am called".

4.5.2 Guilty As Charged: Innocent As She's A Woman Or Somewhere In Between: The Mohini *Devi* Story

During my fieldwork in one village a complex tale of corruption and inter-village and intra-village power dynamics unravelled itself. Kekri is an archetypal Bikaneri village made up of *dhanis* (isolated farms and homes) set among the sand dunes and expanses of scrub which miraculously turn into fields of *bhajra* (millet) when the rains come. There is one tarred road into the village, which is sixteen kilometres from the nearest town, apparently there is a bus which travels this route once a day, but I never saw it. Instead the main vehicles are camel and ox carts, pedestrians and the occasional motorbike or jeep belonging to a government official, NGO or a wealthy *Rajput* or *Jat* land-owner. The centre of the village is made up of the *panchayat* office, a health centre, both of which were nearly always closed, a crumbling school building and a small shop. There are some homes near to the centre and a water trough for animals. Most other residents live in their *dhanis*, which apart from a small number which maybe clustered together are spaced at least a few hundred meters apart. The village is mixed caste. The largest caste groups are *Jat* and *Meghwal*, followed by *Rajput, Kumar* and *Nayak*, with a small number of *Brahmins, Dholis and Lohars*. The wealthiest groups are the *Jats* and the *Rajputs* and the poorest are the *Lohars*.

On first visiting the village we had walked out to the area where we had been told Mohini *Devi*, who had been Sarpanch from 1995 – 2000 lived. Her family members told us she was not there, it later transpired that she had been hiding from us. We met some of the other members of her *panchayat* and those from the previous session including Ratan, who we asked directions from and it turned out was a ward panch during Mohini's session. She invited us to stay with her on our next visit. When we returned to the village a couple of weeks later, we were told that Mohini had been arrested and was in jail on charges of corruption from when she was *sarpanch*. We were advised not to visit Mohini or her family and that there was some suspicion that we had had something to do with the arrest. After things had 'calmed' down a little we were able to talk to both Mohini and her husband about what had happened. Mohini

herself was understandably but unfortunately not forthcoming about the events leading up to the arrest, as such while she is at the centre of these stories her own voice is not heard, which is an unavoidable limitation.

The case is complicated and linked to caste and intra-village rivalries which are explained in more detail in Chapter Seven. Like the story of the forestry department land I was told multiple versions of events. However, the main events generally agreed upon are that the case had begun because labourers were not paid for the work they had done building a road through the village, under the auspices of the *gram panchayat*. This was then investigated and the names of people which were on the muster role had either not been paid or had never even worked on the road. When the investigation was done lots of other inconsistencies in the finances of the *panchayat* were revealed. Mohini was arrested early one morning. She was jailed for a number of days until the family raised her bail by selling her daughter-in-law's jewellery. The original charge was brought by Gurnam Singh a wealthy *Rajput* land owner. Village residents told me that Gurnam Singh had financially supported Mohini's election and was the power behind her candidacy. At some point Mohini and her family had switched sides to another powerful group in the village. A further reason given was that the panchayat had wanted to build a road across Gurnam Singh's land and he had objected. Other villagers told me it wasn't his land anyway and people had always walked across there. Depending on whose story is listened to, at this point or after Gurnam Singh brought the corruption case Mohini accused him of raping her.[12] This allegation was later dropped. People were reluctant to talk about this but those who did were vehement that it could not be true.

Nobody denied that the corruption had taken place while Mohini *Devi* was *Sarpanch*, but guilt and innocence are not straightforward. The extent to which Mohini and her husband were complicit in it or able to do anything about it varied.

Mohini's husband said events had transpired in this way because rich, high caste men dominate the *gram panchayat*. When they no longer complied with these men's wishes Gurnam Singh brought the case against them. He always talked about everything in

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[12] I do not discuss this issue at length because I was not able speak to Mohini about it herself, see the FIR report that had been lodged and everybody I did speak to about it denied it had ever happened and said that Mohini's family made the allegation to get back at Gurnam Singh. As such I do not know whether there is truth in the allegation and cannot even be sure that the charge was ever taken to the police.

terms of we and their trouble even when I reminded him that it was his wife who had gone to jail and would be in court. He said that 'uneducated women don't know anything they don't understand what it means when there are false signatures'. He was also keen to assert the things he had done in the village, building a road to a neighbouring village, extending the school to year eight and building a water pipe. He said that the new house they had built, since Mohini was elected, they had borrowed the money for and they were now in debt.

A few people felt that Mohini was totally innocent and that she didn't know what was going on. Some of these people also felt that it was all down to her husband.

> 'We don't know but we think that she was signing things without knowing - some mistake she is a *shanni* (innocent/shy) woman. Sometimes her husband was not there and they wanted her signature. When her husband is not there what is she to do?' *Older Swami woman*

A member of the management of a local NGO that works around issues of corruption and citizens rights agreed that Mohini was innocent but aware to some degree of what was going on if powerless to prevent it:

> 'In our area in the *gram panchayats*, the woman who becomes *sarpanch* or *up-sarpanch* they don't know what is their responsibility. For example Mohini *Devi's* husband is an ex army man, but he never said to her how the money comes and how to spend it. She was silent because some of the money was coming to her house, so that was the pressure on her to keep silent. She knew there was stealing or something wrong was going on she knew that. But there was pressure on her because the money was coming to her house.'

By far the most common opinion coming from both men and women of all castes was that both Mohini and her husband were pawns in political rivalries between powerful high caste groups in the village. Some said that her husband had become involved with the different powerful groups in the village and he had become an alcoholic[13]. I was told 'so long as he was given alcohol he would do anything', and that he had been convinced to drink so that he could be used. Gurnam Singh had supported Mohini and her husband while they conformed to his demands but others had also solicited the power they had through her position.

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[13] This was not an isolated example in my research, another woman *sarpanch* also told me how elements in the village had convinced her husband to start drinking in order that they could control him. Again she reported that her husband is now an alcoholic.

The NGO worker I spoke to about the case felt that their caste position was the reason that the case had been brought in the first place:

> 'If she was *Rajput, Jat* or *Bishnoi* she would never have been charged. The reservation is
> given to Scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women but the people do not accept it, so this
> is a big reason in these types of cases, they belong to a community that has never been
> powerful or involved in politics. The powerful lobby is always against them.'

The most rare opinion I heard was that she was guilty. One *Rajput* woman was convinced of her guilt and told me Mohini *Devi* is a clever woman who knew exactly what was going on. Another *Rajput* man I spoke to did feel she was guilty and certainly knew that there were things going on that were not right. But he did also see her as a pawn in *Jat* and *Rajput* rivalries in the village. Despite this he was very keen to say that the village people including himself should help her:

> 'It is our *panchayat* it is our village, so it is our *izzat* (shame or honour), we have to forgive
> her, if they write something bad, they're our daughters and sisters. If we don't support
> them it will effect our coming *panchayat*.'

I spoke to Mohini's solicitor briefly, and asked if Mohini's illiterate status and the fact that it is her thumb print rather than a signature on all the *panchayat* documents would make any difference to the case. He told me it wouldn't and that a thumb print is treated the same as a signature.

Mohini's story is complicated, it is about intersecting caste, gender and family power dynamics and also points to the importance of village loyalties. It is about how people adapt to changing policies and how they interpret the consequence. After speaking to women who told me they were frightened of participating in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions due to the corruption and political rivalries in their villages, the fear and confusion Mohini Devi must have been feeling is tragic. Perhaps she is as guilty as the *Rajput* woman saw her to be. Either way she had found herself in a position that she did not have the personal resources to manage and now she had been put in jail and was awaiting prosecution. Whatever version is true, and I suspect that they are all partial truths, none of the other actors in this story have been arrested or have charges standing against them. How empowering has the reservation for women been for Mohini *Devi*? Should we see Mohini *Devi* and other women like her as victims, as responsible for their circumstances or even as unwilling martyrs to the cause of women's empowerment?

In regards to the culture of corruption two key ideas were prevalent in my conversation with villagers in relation to this case and corruption more generally. First, the overwhelming and detrimental impact corruption of many types is having on the development of their villages. This opinion from a *Jat* woman gives examples of this and provides an idea about the anger people feel in regard to it:

> 'No school for the children, because the teacher sometimes teaches and sometimes doesn't. There is no unity in this village, so when work comes nothing happens, they just fight. Corruption is so common. The current *sarpanch* when they come for his signature he runs always there was a dispute a while ago and he left his *dhanni*. When people come his wife rather than offering tea or water, she cries. The best way to overcome corruption is to catch the thief, but the police are all corrupt. My opinion is that the villagers should catch the thief and hang him in the village!' *Jat woman with very young children*

Second, no one purports the view that women's participation would change the corrupt nature of politics. The 'myth-in-the-making... that women tend to be less corrupt than men' (Goetz, forthcoming) has not yet reached all the spaces where this experiment in women's participation is being played out. Alternate views expressed were that corruption might even increase, because if women are not literate and educated they do not have the resources to resist it. However, a further opinion expressed is that through women, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe people getting a quota of seats more people will become knowledgeable and be able to stand up to corrupt forces in the village.

4.6 Exaggerated Expectations

The exaggerated and unrealistic expectations women face upon their entry into formal political participation are clearly exemplified by the quote at the beginning of this chapter. This quote is from a Hunger Project brochure, which is concerned with outlining the ways in which the Hunger Project in Rajasthan has been supporting women *Panchayati Raj* representatives as well as justifying their decision to do so in line with the overall goals of the project. It states that women through their participation in local governance will overcome the deep-seated social and economic divisions that are found within India.

As exemplified by quotes in earlier sections of this chapter it is a common assumption coming from many different social groups and positions in society that once women are in politics the political dynamic will be transformed, and that large inroads to stop

corruption will begin. It is assumed that women's first allegiance in politics will be to 'women's issues' and/or specific issues for social development, such as education, drinking water and so forth. This local perspective, coming out of my fieldwork in Northwest Rajasthan also has a dominant position in national discourses in India and in globalised views of women's participation in politics. Sathaye (1998:17) reports that these perceptions are widely held among feminist activists in India. Rai (1999: 96) states that it is a commonly held view that women will transform politics. Furthermore, due to both the geographical areas in which *panchayati raj* operates and what is implied in much of the literature which favours the quota system, the responsibility for this *transformation* appears to lie at the feet of, poor rural women.

Batliwala and Dahnraj (2004:14) identify this assumption that women will adopt policies and practices that promote social and gender equality as another "gender myth". They cite the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to illustrate its acceptance among feminist from both North and South:

> 'If women gain access to political power, they will opt for politics and policies that promote social and gender equality, peace and sustainable development. Thus, quotas or other methods of ensuring high proportions of women in elected bodies will transform these institutions. Women will alter the character of political culture and the practice of public power.' (United Nations, 1995)

This often promulgated opinion is rarely backed up by empirical data or evidence. Sathaye (1998) based on her work on all women *panchayats* in Maharastra found that personal ambition and needs dominated the way the *panchayat* she studied operated. She is keen to add that this does not mean that women will not bring something new to the political arena. In the conclusion of the same book Datta (1998:117) reports that little difference was found in their studies and in others (citing, Shiviah and Srivastava, 1990), between the formal schemes instigated by all women's panchayats and panchayats made up of only men. Based on what women and men told me were the needs for their villages there did not seem to be any difference between men's and women's priorities.

As was pointed out in Chapter Two, when discussing empowerment, women do not always organise for equitable social development, but instead may be part of racist, sexist, fundamentalist or elitist movements. Similarly, regarding more institutionalised

participation Battiwala and Dhanraj (2004) point to the successes Christian fundamentalist organisations and political parties in the USA and Hindu fundamentalist organisations and political parties in India have had in recruiting women.

As Goetz (forthcoming) argues the instrumentalist argument for bringing women into politics through a quota system because they are less corrupt 'is not just vulnerable to exposure as a myth; but it puts women's engagement in the public arena on the wrong foot'. It implies for women to have equal rights to men in politics they must perform in a more accountable and responsible manner, at the least, as well as struggle against and change the endemic system of corruption and inefficiency that already exists. What will happen when women fail to live up to the impossibility of these demands? What will happen if it is found out that they are no worse or no better at political representation than men?

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has made the case that the motivations of those who encourage and initiate 'poor rural' women's participation and the motivations of the women who participate do not only differ in many ways but also greatly affect the process and outcomes of the participation itself. I argue that there are two dominant rationales for instigating women's empowerment: the empowerment rationale and the efficiency rationale.

In regard to women's participation in *mahila sangathans*, material needs have been prioritised over women's empowerment. I do not deny that through their membership of these groups women have found a space to air their concerns and form alternate social support structures and friendships. Instead, I contend that the process of appeasement to gender norms through material gain has created a dependency upon such benefits for the continuation of a space for women to come together.

Women's participation in the *panchayats* is demonstrated to be a frightening experience for some women, leaving them feeling forced into political positions without the capacity to manage them. Consequently not only is political participation not necessarily empowering for women, without the social structures and capabilities which enable them to have control over the power which is in their name it can be detrimental to their well-being.

The efficiency rationale has been a primary justification for a quota for women in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions. Similarly, it has been a key motivator for URMUL Trust initiating and channelling much of their development assistance through the *mahila sangathans*. The arguments underpinning the efficiency rational are not only deeply flawed and unsubstantiated but also highly problematic in terms of limiting the potential of women's participation to be empowering. In the case of the *sangathans* this has led to strategic gender interests becoming secondary in importance. In the case of the *panchayats* women's right to participate in politics is being justified by exaggerated and unrealistic expectations of their performance.

The efficiency rationale also demands that women participate in a particular manner. The following chapter looks in more detail at the manner in which women are expected to behave when participating in both the *mahila sangathans* and the *Panchayati Raj* institutions.

CHAPTER FIVE

LEARNING TO SPEAK, ENABLING VOICE: KNOWLEDGE, AWARENESS AND APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR.

'Other women come to the meetings but they don't speak much, only if they have a problem do they speak out, because they have *ghunghat*, because it is their *sasural*. But it is my *pihar* so I can keep my face uncovered.... Although I can say anything and no one minds, because this is my *pihar*, I speak less because I am not educated. If there are a few men then I speak, if there are a lot of men then I remain quiet.' *Young Jat woman ward panch*

5.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by discussing attributes that are seen as both necessary for a rise in women's status and as symbolic of an 'empowered woman', by members of the *mahila sangathans*, *Panchayati Raj* institutions and the wider community, in the area of my research. The concepts of and discourses around being able to speak, being aware and having knowledge are explored. Following on from this the chapter identifies and and provides an analysis of why certain ways of behaving are not seen as appropriate and others are for women who are participating in either *Panchayati Raj* institutions or *sangathans*. Women are expected to adopt certain emblematic behaviours according to certain situations. Using this analysis I discuss representations of poor, village women. The extent to which these, often negative stereotypes, are internalised or made use of by women in the villages I was studying is also addressed. The chapter argues that in order to gain a sense of the realities of women's participation it is essential that women are disaggregated not only on the grounds of economic class, caste and education levels but also generation and family position at the least.

The first section of the chapter discusses the idea of being able to speak. It is recognised that having voice and asserting ones right to voice is deeply associated with agency and the ability to act in ones own best interest. In the context of Bikaneri society, whereby most girls and young women have their right to speak and their ability to act deeply circumscribed at the time of *mooklava,* speaking has a particularly poignant symbolic position. The conceptual link made between *ghunghat* and speaking is also explored. I illustrate how *ghunghat*, like speaking is used symbolically.

This section also identifies a more literal way in which women talked about learning to speak. Women express the view that through their participation they are being taught the correct way of speaking and conducting themselves in meetings.

The next section considers how knowledge and awareness are conceptualised within the communities of the research. A new-found knowledge and awareness are seen by those participating, NGO workers and the wider community to be essential for successful participation. At the same time the participation itself is seen to provide this very knowledge and awareness. An interpretation of what types of knowledge and awareness are being talked about by the various actors is provided.

The usefulness of the knowledge women gain through their participation in both *panchayats* and *sangathans* is acknowledged. However, it most usually remains rhetorical in nature. While women are well versed in the various negative consequences of entrenched social behaviours they are without the power, unable or unwilling to put this awareness into practice. I, therefore, make a case for the incorporation of men in initiatives to empower women and change detrimental gender hierarchies would at the least be helpful if not essential. This analysis feeds into the discussion that follows regarding appropriate behaviour.

This discussion looks at the manner in which women are expected to participate. It argues that women in the political realms of the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions are expected to adopt certain types of behaviour, which are often at odds with the norms of behaviour required in their everyday lives. Similarly, women members of *sangathans* themselves describe how their participation has led to them learning new types of behaviour in regard to everyday practices. Through this exploration of appropriate behaviours I argue that a negative conceptualisation of village women exists in which they are seen as a backward other compared to their urban counterparts. Through participation and the use of correct knowledge these women are meant to either become more like the constructed ideal of an urban educated Indian woman or the idealised [middle-class] Indian wife and mother identified in previous chapters. I will at this point also argue that within donor, academic and popular literature another form of 'othering' exists namely 'positive othering'.

The last and final section of this chapter considers the ways in which women's participation is tolerated and is even incorporate into the norms of gender relations. Consequently, even where political participation does transgress norms of gendered behaviour it is possible, and desirable to some, that this will not lead to any change in gender roles and relations within the arena of either the household or family.

5.2 Learning To Speak And 'Having Voice'

'Urmul Trust people they gave us brains and therefore we began to think about things and now we can speak to anyone. They enabled us to do everything, to speak about everything, to speak and slowly we try to make other women become part of the organisation.... Yes changes came. I learned to speak.... Yes they (the daughters-in-law) come. They don't speak but they come in the *sangathan....* And the others (women who are less active in the *sangathan*) say we don't know how to speak and they don't speak. They say, "what will we say there, we can't speak?"'*Elderly woman sangathan member.*

'In every activity she stays in front and she is the best person to have won the *panchayat* seat because there you have to control all the people. There she can speak if there are fifty men or one hundred men... to control them one needs to have the proper way of talking.' *Husband of current up-sarpanch*

As these quotes illustrate speaking is equated with effective participation and levels of participation are measured in terms of how much a person speaks. Speaking is something women feel they had to learn how to do in order to effectively participate. A number of women who said the community had asked them to stand for election said that they were asked because they speak well. Similarly, when asking either family members or the women themselves what they had gained through their participation, the response was frequently, if change was acknowledged, that they had learned to speak.

'If a person goes to the *panchayat* they'll learn something. Like if she stays in the *panchayat* for five years she'll start speaking. Like she can speak to you, she can speak to officials. She'll learn and she'll learn to speak.' *Former ward panch's husband*

'There is a big change in women's attitude before this they didn't know anything about anything. Now they know lots of things. They are able to speak in front of the government officials and they are able to talk in front of strangers and they give the answers, but before this they had their *ghunghat* and they answered (makes a clicking sound with her tongue used by *Rajput* daughters-in-law, to communicate in front of their in-laws).' *Former ward panch, who is however talking about the effects of an NGOs involvement in her village.*

'Within ten years we wanted to see the particular village's success but still we have not got that, so we made some mistakes. Changes are coming but they are very slow and in every village you find one or two women who have come out and they are able to speak, they are

able to speak in front of the powerful men or in front of the powerful lobby. You can see the differences you can see the changes but they are very slow.' *Male NGO worker*

In a similar manner a person's ability to speak is indicative of their status more generally. A woman explaining to me how her father was a powerful man in the village illustrated it in terms of his ability to speak to anybody. She explained that her own ability to speak her mind and not be frightened of speaking to anyone she had learned through watching her father. In another example a woman who had been a long-term member of a *sangathan*, but had never been as active as other members, explained her status in the organisation thus:

'They [more active women] remain in front, only they speak. We walk behind, only they speak we are just followers.'

The use of the word follower is interesting here, as discussed in Chapter Three women describe their position in their *sasural* villages as being that of a follower and this status is given as a reason for their lack of agency:

'Women are our followers so they should keep silent.... Because women are the followers, because women have left their parents and come with men. It is their duty to keep silent.' *Son of sangathan member*

A similarity can be seen between how women conceptualise their position in the political realm and their position in their families and households. The relationship can be seen by looking at the symbolic position of *ghunghat* in the context of participation. Speaking and *ghunghat* are intimately linked in terms of being emblems of a woman's status. As much as speaking is symbolic of effective participation *ghunghat* is symbolic of being able to speak. If someone wanted to tell me a woman *sarpanch* or *ward panch* was not participating in meetings, meaning she was not speaking I would be told, 'she had her ghunghat'. Equally common to hear was the expression, 'I/she had my/her ghunghat I/she couldn't speak'. As is discussed below in the section titled *Positive Othering: Negative Othering* a lack of *ghunghat* is, in opposition to this, seen to be symbolic of a liberated woman.

I, therefore, argue that the concepts of speaking and *ghunghat* are used as both a measure and a symbol of women's levels of participation. This is itself a reflection of the symbolic value of speaking and *ghunghat* in relation to a woman's more generalised status throughout her life cycle. As described in Chapter Three a woman upon moving

to her *sasural* has her right to voice significantly repressed and at the same time she will adopt *ghunghat*. As time passes and her status increases her right to voice increases and the number of times and places in which *ghunghat* is required lessens. I am not making the case here that a woman who wears ghunghat or who speaks less in the household, or any other space for that matter, is necessarily more subjugated than one in a contrary position. [1] However, these two attributes are seen by many in the area of my fieldwork to be indicative of levels of women's agency. Similarly, they are used as a shorthand way of communicating a woman's perceived level of status or agency.

Women's views on the practice of *ghunghat* are frequently contradictory. On the one hand objectively women complain about both the practices of *ghunghat* and *purdah* and subjectively in regards to their personal experiences of having to wear *ghunghat*. On the other hand it is defended as something good for young women to do or something which is part of their tradition and so is seen as positive. The quotes below typify such a contradiction:

> 'What is the betterment of *ghunghat*? What is the point of *ghunghat*? In *ghunghat* she sits in hesitation, she is not able to speak properly. Maybe she will become anaemic covering her face. If they did not have *ghunghat* they would be able to talk to anybody and laugh and joke and it would make them happy.'

And a very short while later during the same conversation this woman tells me:

> 'It is good they have *ghunghat* in front of *jhet* [husband's elder brother] and *sasur* [father-in-law]. They have just a little bit of *ghunghat* and they talk to them.' Older *Nayak woman, a mother, mother-in-law and former ward panch*

Ghunghat and being able or 'knowing how to speak' are symbolic of a woman's ability to effectively participate in the public realm and symbolic of a woman's status more generally. However, the idea of learning to speak is also used far more literally. Both women who are members of the *sangathans* and many women who had or have seats in the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions feel that they need to learn how to literally speak properly:

> 'We learned to speak. When we first gathered we didn't know, we didn't know who to listen to, should we listen to her? Everyone was talking all at once. Now when I speak they keep silent when she speaks the rest of them keep silent. When I stop she speaks when

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[1] Mayaram (2000) in her research on women's participation in *Panchayati Raj* institutions across three districts in Rajasthan states that veiling in Bikaner, in particular, operates simultaneously with the silencing of women's voices, and women's invisibility in the public sphere.

she speaks we stop. When we speak then others don't speak, so you have to learn to speak.' *Middle-aged sangathan member.*

'I don't know how to sign and if we need to go outside and give an application or letter I don't know how to speak properly.... If someone is educated then he knows how to speak and would have more knowledge.... I understand how to speak to the guests and the other persons so I'm trying to teach the *Sarpanch* Mohini Devi, "please you don't tell lies, learn to speak properly". But she is stupid.' *Older former ward panch*

These quotes illustrate how a particular way of acting in the public political realm is seen to be correct. Poor rural women often felt they needed to learn how to behave according to it. Skills and abilities which conversely it is implied middle-class educated women and men were seen to already possess.

Women's lack of voice in their households and their communities is something recognised by NGO workers and as such formed a major justification for instigating village *sangathans* for women:

'We don't have the right that women can speak but in the villages. No one gives them that right, so it is a kind of exploitation of women, so we want to give them rights so that they can start speaking.' *Male NGO worker.*

'She was in that *sangathan* [essentially a *sangathan* for men] because she is a daughter of the village, so she could speak, but the daughters-in-law can't speak.' *Management level male NGO worker*

One of the aims of the *mahila sangathans,* is providing a space for women to talk in which their voices are not suppressed. In this context the NGO is principally providing an alternative sex segregated space for women's voices rather than necessarily enabling them to raise their voices in spaces which they have traditionally been excluded from in their communities and villages. Spaces need to be found where women are supported and encouraged to speak and assert themselves in front of male kin and fictive kin as well as the wider community.

5.3 Knowledge And Awareness

'What's changed? There's no rain, only the hot wind is blowing. I started visiting places and then I gained knowledge. *Older meghwal sangathan member*

Like speaking and *ghunghat* almost all those who informed my research spoke about knowledge and awareness in relation to women's participation in both the *sangathans* and the *panchayats*. It is a widely held view that women gain knowledge and become more aware through their participation. However, knowledge, awareness and information are all commonly referred to in an abstract fashion. What was meant by or what types of knowledge are being referred to is often not made clear. The statements below are typical:

> 'It is good for women, they will become smart and clever by attending *panchayat* meetings. Because no one gives permission for women to go out of their houses if they get seats then they will become aware and alert and be able to see different places.' *Younger Rajput former ward panch*

> 'The government policy is good, the government wants women to come out so that they get more knowledge and information and they'll work like men and they'll be able to start any work in the village.' *Older Nayak former ward panch*

> 'Urmul Trust people gave us brains.' *Older Nayak sangathan member*

Despite this, knowledge and awareness, are at times, talked about in relation to particular subjects. Reflecting women's gender roles, there is a good deal of similarity between the ways in which knowledge and awareness are talked about in relation to both *mahila sangathans* and the *Panchayat Raj* Institutions. The principal subject areas in which knowledge and awareness are discussed are government schemes and people's rights, social issues, particularly health and education, women's mobility, attitudes towards outsiders and the adoption of particular behaviours. Using the voices of different community members I now discuss each of these areas of knowledge and their relationship to discourses on women's participation.

Knowledge of government programmes and people's rights to certain services are obviously a key source of information gained by and seen as a pre-requisite for women *panchayat* representatives. Information about government schemes is something which the majority of those I spoke to feel they have learned, or their female relatives have learned, even if in reality their participation in the *panchayat* body was very small. These quotes are from women who participated to various degrees in the *panchayats* but who all felt they had learned a good deal:

> 'At that time I didn't know what is a meeting, what is a *Sarpanch*, what is the work of a *Sarpanch*, so I didn't have knowledge. But after five years I went to different places and I

learned lots of things and my inner eyes opened.' *Sath former sarpanch who is in her mid forties*

'I got my seat on the *panchayat* and now I have information and try to gather as much knowledge as I can and as much information.... There is a book on *panchayat* and in that everything is given, how much power does a candidate have. I have the same power as a *Sarpanch* has and if the *Sarpanch* is not present I can do anything.' *Current Jain up-sarpanch who is in her mid thirties*

'As they told us we did the work. I learned about the disabled people, like how to start their allowances. And the widow women we wrote down their names and we started their pensions and we were trying to get money for the poor.' *Older Nayak former ward panch*

Women members of *sangathans* rarely talk directly about their knowledge of government schemes and projects. However, NGO workers make it clear that informing women about these things is an important objective for the Trust in forming the *sangathans*:

'[We made] *sangathans* of the poor, to give them awareness and information; how the government planning works, how many government plans are for us and who will benefit from them.' Male *NGO worker*

'The main aim is that the poor will come out either male or female. For instance in the villages the people don't know about their rights so we should tell them what their rights are.' *Male NGO worker*

Members of the *mahila sangathans* are more likely to express any enhanced knowledge of their rights and entitlements through their lack of fear in challenging government officers and bureaucrats:

'Now we are not afraid of anybody. Not even the *thesildar*, collector, *sarpanch*.... We are dying from thirst, but we are not afraid of anyone.... They are nothing in front of us - collector, *sarpanch* and *thesildar*. Whatever is in our power – whatever belongs to us we'll grab it.' *Older sangathan member*

However, this type of response was not that common and mainly came from those who had been involved for a long time and who had taken part in more radical political actions when the *sangathans* were first formed. This reflects the changing priorities of the NGO and the women's motivation for participating, as discussed in Chapters Four and Seven.

One of the things women *sangathan* members are most proud of is the knowledge they have gained in relation to social issues, particularly in relation to health and education.

They state that due to their increased knowledge they now aim to send their daughters to school and wait until they are older to marry them. Knowledge of health issues is demonstrated by saying how certain health care procedures are now adhered to:

'Now we teach our girls, before we didn't have any knowledge. We didn't know anything about studies and the like. Now we send our daughters [to school], earlier we didn't know about these things. Previously we married our daughters at an early age now we'll get them married when they are twenty or twenty one.' *Older sangathan member*

'We have understood some things, we believe in some things.... Earlier they never used to educate their children.... Earlier the pregnant women never went out to get injections and now they are doing that, now children are inoculated. Earlier this never used to take place. Earlier there were a lot of diseases in the village, now we know about the diseases and the solutions.' *Sangathan member in her mid thirties*

Women's awareness regarding the negative consequences of child marriages and not educating girl children and so forth cannot be seen as solely a consequence of the intervention of the Trust in these villages. The general rhetoric around these issues coming from those who had had and those who had not had direct interactions with NGOs and other agencies was in line with this. However, there can be no doubt that the women's involvement in the *sangathan* cemented these views and created a greater understanding around them. Similarly, women themselves generally attributed their knowledge of these issues to their membership of the *sangathan*.

Unfortunately while the rhetoric and beliefs espoused by these women are emancipatory in terms of gender issues, it is apparent that the possibilities for making many of these ideas a reality within the context of their own families is severely limited. The ideas may have changed but the actuality of events is a long way behind. I use thoughts around the age of marriage for girls as an example, principally because it was so often talked about and something which all those I spoke to seemed to feel strongly about. This first quote is from Meena *bai*, a woman in her fifties who has both been a *ward panch* and a very active member of a village *sangathan*:

'So now we have the knowledge that in the early ages it is a pain for the girl and a pain for the parents as well. Because we did our Teeja's [one of her elder daughters] marriage at an early age she is in a bad condition. You know she has three children. Now we understand that if we hadn't done her marriage at an early age she would be in a good condition. I have lots of knowledge.'

On another occasion I ask the same woman at what age her youngest daughter, who is now twelve or thirteen, will be married:

> 'Twenty years twenty or twenty-one years... because I have faced lots of problems and troubles so I have the knowledge that early marriages are not good.... If she is properly educated and she doesn't get a job then she will be able to run the centres [village education centres] and other kinds of activities so that she can earn for herself. Maybe she will become a teacher or maybe she will be involved in some other work.'

On one of my last visits to this village Meena told me they were looking for a husband for her youngest daughter.

Another woman, Bina *bai,* who lives in her *pihar* and is educated and the main provider for her household, told me on several occasions that she would not marry her elder daughters until they are at least nineteen or twenty. Despite this woman's relatively powerful position in her household on one of my last visits to her village as well she told me that her *jhet* (husband's elder brother) had arranged for her two elder daughters, both aged between fourteen and sixteen, to be married into families in Calcutta. Bina *bai* was obviously distressed and concerned about this but felt there was nothing she could do to stop it happening. She tried to make the most of a difficult and disturbing situation by talking about the boys being from wealthy families and consequently how her daughters would not have so much work to do as they do now and so forth. This story demonstrates the power family members beyond the household have over the lives of household members. Bina's brother-in-law not only did not live in their household or village but lived in another state and yet against Bina's wishes was able to decide when his nieces would be married and who to!

The dilemma these women face between what they feel is the best life-course for their daughters and what they feel they are able to institute was made clear during a focus group, of middle aged and older *meghwal* women, in which the age for boys and girls to get married was discussed:

Sangathan member	It should be 18 or 19, but it is 15 or 16 it is obvious.
Sangathan member	20 for girls 25 for boys.
Sangathan member	It's crazy! Everybody has the knowledge but it is not possible to implement it.
Sangathan member	Look it is good to discuss this type of issue but it is not possible to implement these things here. The girls are sitting here, and we are

	just thinking, if the gods give us food this year we are ready to get them married.
Sangathan member	What the organisation people are saying what the others are saying is our family matter.
Sangathan member	If god doesn't give grain for another two years we will wait. If our family follows us we are ready to give them *phear* [meaning get them married]. So there is no sense in what the people of the organisation says to us.
Sangathan member	Everybody knows.
Sangathan member	But they don't follow it. To get the people to follow it what should we do?
Sangathan member	Who is able to follow it?
Sangathan member	There is no solution to it.

This excerpt shows that those talking are aware of the problems associated with early marriage and would rather their daughters, and sons for that matter, were married when they are considerably older than is the norm. Despite this they feel powerless to either change community attitudes or to bring about a change in their own families. The social pressures to get girls married at a young age outweighs the knowledge of the detrimental effects it has.

Other members of the community, particularly male family members, need to be incorporated into these processes of knowledge accumulation regarding issues which are commonly seen to be women's issues. Examples of these issues include health, particularly reproductive health and children's well-being. Only working with women around these issues reinforces them as exclusively impacting on the lives of women. Likewise, it continues to make women solely responsible for any change in regard to such issues, as well as the practical day to day management of household health and child welfare. The incorporation of men into discussions and knowledge accumulation regarding such issues would enhance the process of implementing emancipatory social change. Furthermore, I contend that men have as much responsibility as women to challenge detrimental power dynamics, based on gender, generation and place.

The lack of male participation in discussions on these issues was something I raised with different NGO workers. The response was often that men already have knowledge

and that it is easy for them to access knowledge if they want to. This following quote presents both these view points:

> 'We work with women because most of the men have knowledge and can get education but women are the sufferers, like the girls don't have facilities for education, so we thought we want to give them some awareness so that they can come out.' *Male NGO worker*

Men usually do have more access to different types of information, particularly that which falls into the first category discussed here of knowledge about government schemes and programmes. However, it is safe to assume that many of the types of knowledge NGO workers were aiming to impart to women, men would not seek out for themselves simply due to their greater mobility in the public realm. It is highly unlikely that men in these communities would seek out information on, for instance, sexual and reproductive health, legal issues in regard to sexual harassment or the emotional and physical damage caused by child marriages. Furthermore, even though it is presumed women pass on the information they receive, as discussed in Chapter Four, it can still be surmised that there is an assumption that these things are indeed the responsibility of women.

Bringing men into 'women's projects' which deal with gender issues has been a focus in the gender and development literature over the last decade, along with men's role in gender and development practice, policy and institutions more widely (for example, see Chant and Guttman, 2000; Cornwall, 1998; IDS, 2000; Sweetman [ed.] 1997). Chant and Guttman (2000: 19) identify some of the concerns coming from some gender and development practitioners in bringing men in to what have been women only projects. They highlight fears including 'a reduced profile and visibility for women and women's concerns, the hijacking and subversion of women-orientated projects, and the dilution of feminist struggles'. Such a critique, however, makes the assumption that women's concerns are not relevant to men. While women may be the primary 'victims' of certain behaviours, for example sexual violence, this does not make it their concern alone.

Similarly, family concerns are often assumed to be women's concerns and women are seen as the most efficient means of distributing services to families and communities, consequently women's projects have aimed to work with women on these issues. Development interventions through women's projects have often aimed to 'reduce the time and energy women expend in activities such as fuel and water collection, they have

not tended to challenge the idea that domestic chores must necessarily be carried out by women' (Sweetman, 1997: 5).

A further issue of concern in the literature on men and gender development is that not all men benefit from gender hierarchies and constructions of hegemonic masculinity, a position taken by Cornwall (1998: 51):

> '[T]he single categories "women" and "men" that are often used in development work mask the dynamics of power between gendered individuals. Not all men have power. Some are men who... are disadvantaged as not-quit-adult males..., those who fail conform with dominant models of masculinity and are treated with disdain by other men and women. Others still may be under pressure to demonstrate the public face of acceptable masculinity and yet behave quite differently in private. And not all those who have power are men. Certain ways of being a woman are also associated with power.'

While I accept this alongside the notion that gender concerns being defined as women's concerns rest on biological determinism, the reality on the ground is that, although some men are pressurised to act against their own wants and desires, women as individuals and as a group fare far worse in gender hierarchies. For example many young men I met did not want to get married and have children at a young age but were given no choice by the family and community. However, the consequences for girls getting married and moving to a different village and so on and so forth are far more detrimental to their well-being and this must not be lost sight of.

Cornwall (1998) using Strathern's (1988) work in Papua New Guinea and her own work in Nigeria draws attention to the way in which people describe their communities (including women members) as strong or powerful or individual women members as strong or powerful by referring to them as men. This illustrates the way in which gender is used as a metaphor (Cornwall, 1998: 52). However, the problem with only understanding gender as a metaphor for power and not located in and performed by actual bodies, is the metaphor of 'man' is more likely to be applied positively, while the metaphor of 'woman' is more likely to be applied negatively, as this quote clearly illustrates:

> 'We don't know anymore than how to sign. If you are educated, you are a man [regardless of sex]; if you are not, you are not a man. There is no benefit in being uneducated, whether they are a woman or a man without education they are not men.' *Middle-aged Brahmin woman.*

Consequently, the incorporation of men into 'women's work' as Sweetman (1998: 5) points out may be more difficult than getting women to behave 'like men'. 'While women who perform 'men's work' may eventually be admired, a man is more likely to lose status if he attempts to move across the dividing line'. Masculinity may be a construction and used metaphorically but it is also located in and associated with biological men, even if 'many men do not actually match up to idealised forms of masculinity [and] can be disempowered or marginalised [by them]' (Cornwall, 1997: 11).

Some men in some circumstances lose out because of gender hierarchies and many are likely to have more fulfilled lives living under more equitable gender regimes. However, my arguments lie less in incorporating men into gender and development as a means to liberate men, although this maybe a good and motivational side effect, and instead first, as discussed above, to prevent gender issues being reinforced as women's issues. Second, and closely related to this, is to make men equally responsible for changing inequitable gender hierarchies. This sentiment is neatly summed up by Goodwin (1997: 6, cited in Chant and Guttman,2000: 9) when evaluating a gender training programme for male community organisers in Tamil Nadu:

> 'If women hold up half the sky, then they cannot hold up more than their half of the
> responsibilities towards gender change. Organisers and participants alike agreed that men
> of conscience should play more than just a supportive role in this search for justice. Given
> the critical leadership positions of many men in social movements, to expect anything else
> would be self-defeating'

Third, men need to be encouraged to take part in processes to overcome detrimental gender norms in order to speed up the process. I am not saying that women are not capable of conducting feminist struggles unsupported, instead this slow process is likely to be enhanced through men's participation. I was repeatedly told by NGO workers, whenever I questioned how much success they were having, or not, regarding making changes, that it is a very slow process. This slowness in making changes appeared to be acceptable and that nothing could be done to accelerate it. However, it seems that one of the most limiting factors is that while gender norms are both constructed and reinforced by the entire community, only one section of the community are involved in awareness raising projects. Chant and Guttman (2000), drawing on research by Budowski and Guzman (1998) and Chant (1997) also point to the limitations of changing detrimental gender systems and working around women's strategic gender

interests, when men are not included in the 're-socialisation of roles'. Men need to be incorporated into processes which aim to deconstruct masculinity as much as women have been, and continue to be, part of processes which aim to de-construct femininity and what it means to be a woman.

> 'The logic of this is clear. If women alone work for greater equality in gender relations they will face an uphill struggle. It will be another kind of 'double day', where they have to take responsibility not only for changing their own ideologies and practice, but those of their men as well' (White: 1997: 15).

The argument made by NGO workers regarding men's greater access to knowledge lay in their freedom of movement in the public sphere. Consequently, women's ability to acquire knowledge and awareness is seen to be enhanced though a process of increased mobility. Many of the stories women *sangathan* members told me illustrate the emphasis URMUL Trust placed on increasing women's mobility beyond the confines of their villages, particularly in the early days of the *sangathans'* formation:

> 'Like Sanjay [first secretary and founder of the Trust] used to take us to different villages to teach us, in the same way as you are learning, trying to learn by visiting different villages.'
> *Older long standing sangathan member*

> 'The women go out from their houses they get some information and have some benefits. They become smarter. It makes them smarter going out from their houses and meeting with the officers and the other village people. They are better informed in some cases and they are smarter than the housewives.' *Middle-aged son of sangathan member*

A similar relationship between mobility and knowledge was asserted by members of *Panchayat Raj* institutions:

> 'If we sit in the corner of our houses, how is it possible for women to get knowledge. Before being in the *panchayat* women were always only in their *pihar* or *sasural*. After being involved in politics they have the opportunity to go out from their houses to attend the meetings and visit other place, so that they get lots of knowledge and awareness.'
> *Older former Nayak woman sarpanch*

In the context of Bikaneri gender norms increased mobility for women involves very little in terms of distance or frequency. For instance, going for a meeting in the nearest small town or travelling to the NGO headquarters in either the district headquarters or Bikaner itself can be a significant move. Not only do social mores restrict women's mobility, this very lack of mobility encourages the belief that women are not capable of

travelling to places beyond their villages unescorted. As such this awareness, gained through participation, is seen as something enabling women's mobility:

> 'She has become a bit aware. Now if I tell her to go to Chattergarh [neighbouring district] she can go.' *Sangathan member's husband*

Followed by:

> 'She didn't [previously] know what money was she didn't know the difference between a ten rupee and a hundred rupee note.' *Sangathan member's brother-in-law*

In a similar manner to the way in which speaking has both a symbolic and a literal meaning, the expression 'coming out', describes both women's entry into the public political realm and the supposed greater status this imbues upon them, as well as, literally meaning women were coming out of their houses. Participation is, therefore, seen to be enable women to enter into the 'outside' world.

Similarly, participation is understood by *sangathan* members as something which makes it possible for them to engage with and understand 'outsiders' who come to their villages:

> 'Earlier the women never used to go out of the houses. If anyone came from another place came then the people were afraid. Why are women from other villages going with them. Now that has changed.' *Older sangathan member.*

> 'After being in the meetings and going out from my house and having contact with lots of other women I started to understand things. Before that when other women came to the village we thought that they would be the sterilisation *walla* [person who does] family planning *walla* and we thought they would just sterilise us.' *Middle-aged sangathan member*

Interpreting a diminishing of villagers' suspicions of outsiders as something positive is highly questionable. Rather than the irrational fear that it is at times presented as, village people's fear of 'outsiders' is well founded, as illustrated in Chapter Four.

5.4 Adopting Appropriate Behaviour

Learning how to interact with 'outsiders' is something women *sangathan* members feel they have learned. Principally, but not solely, they would tell me they had learned how to treat guests properly. This was something which both surprised and disturbed me. The implication being that prior to participation women had not known how to behave correctly. There are of course different ways to interpret these statements. It could be

another way of saying that they had learned to accept the people of the Trust, who were viewed as outsiders when they first started working in these villages. It could also be because I was a guest myself a way of saying that they were treating me well and wanted to treat me well. However, I see yet another explanation for these statements. It fits in with an un-stated but often implied idea that poor rural women needed to learn certain ways of behaving which were more like an idealised version of middle-class educated urban women. This was implied in some conversations I had with people who worked in government offices and those who worked for NGOs (both NGO employees from urban and rural backgrounds) as well as other members of the wider community. As the quotes throughout this section illustrate village women's representation of themselves often concurs with this negative assumption coming from others. This quote is an example of many comments made by women which imply they are always the ones who need to learn how to behave differently.

> 'When URMUL Trust started in our area they gave us lots of information and lots of knowledge. How to eat, how to sleep, how to talk, they gave us lots of information and lots of education and they gave us proper manners.' *Older sangathan member*

Statements like this could be interpreted as a way in which people communicate that the impact of interventions by the Trust were life changing. However, the emphasis on certain etiquettes combined with a more generalised urban rural divide, and ideologies in regard to appropriate behaviour for women as wives and mothers, has led me to interpret these statements to mean that in order for social development to take place it is poor rural women who need to learn to behave differently. For example, after interviewing one senior worker a group of girls who had attended a previous *Balika Shivir* (education camp) came to the office to talk to him. He was keen to show me what the girls had learned by attending the camp and asked them to tell me. They were shy and a little hesitant. The worker therefore began to prompt them telling them to tell me how they had learned about cleanliness, cooking, the right food, health and how to talk.

In another example a senior NGO worker again during a discussion on the *Balika Shivirs* said to me:

> 'I think these *shivirs* are the best programme for the coming women's generation because we are covering a whole lot of things. That is nutrition for women and young girls, education and giving them information.... They will become fully fledged citizens.... And

again population wise if you train the girls for family care for the rest of their lives they can make their own decisions.'

Since cooking, cleanliness and family care are very much part of rural girls' general socialisation to be good wives and mothers I can only interpret these statements as part of a discourse in which poor rural women are not seen as carrying out their domestic roles in the <u>correct</u> manner. Of course the question needs to be asked what is considered to be the correct type of female behaviour within this discourse.

I use these quotes given by NGO workers to demonstrate the prevalence of this discourse in the region of my fieldwork. These opinions held by NGO workers are influenced by wider discourses within society. However, it is important to stress that despite these views being held by many who worked for the NGO, URMUL Trust is not a particularly conservative NGO and does have more radical aims and objectives.

> 'This is a wide curriculum for these girls, for better life options. A package of better life
> options which can provide them with better nutrition, better health care, confidence, legal
> information and information about *panchayati raj*, health and hygiene. Because that will
> make them awaken and they will be able to discuss anything with anybody. This change
> will bring them empowerment.'

It was not only within the context of the *sangathans* that certain behaviours were expected. I again return to the symbolism and use of *ghunghat* to provide empirical examples illustrating how particular appropriate and correct behaviours are expected of *Panchayat Raj* representatives. Despite this aspect of *purdah* being widely adopted by all sections of society in Bikaner district, and to differing degrees among most Rajasthani communities, women political representatives are not expected to be wearing *ghunghat*. At the least they should not be veiled when going about their political duties. I argue that this is because not being in *ghunghat* is emblematic of an urban, educated, woman: the type of woman who is most usually seen participating in formal politics.

The events leading to the *sarpanch* of one *gram panchayat* no longer wearing her *ghunghat* at meetings clearly illustrate this. This particular woman *sarpanch* beyond physically attending *panchayat* meetings and other functions, which she had to attend in her role as *sarpanch*, did not participate in *panchayat* business and is, unfortunately, a

good example of a proxy politician for her husband.[2] At the first couple of meetings I attended she sat in *ghunghat* not speaking a word. After three months of not attending meetings in this village I returned to one. While the *sarpanch* still continued to sit at the head table looking uncomfortable and in silence, she was no longer veiled. She herself had always been quite reluctant to talk to me. However, I asked other members of the *panchayat* what had happened; why she no longer wore her *ghunghat* at meetings. They informed me that on 15th August, Indian Independence Day, the *ward panches* had all lifted her *ghunghat*, because they were embarrassed to have the *sarpanch* of their *panchayat* wearing *ghunghat*. When I did manage to interview her she confirmed this story. She of course continues to wear *ghunghat*, in the appropriate spaces and at the appropriate times, in relation to her family and household.

A second example is that of a woman who held a more senior elected position in the *Panchayat Raj* institutions. She comes from a middle-class family and is well educated. She had completely abandoned the practice of *ghunghat* in preparation for her election campaign. Again this was not presented to me as being her choice but instead that of the head of her *sasural* family; her father-in-law:

> 'Because she is more educated than the others, all the other daughter in laws have *ghunghat* so they are not able to talk to everybody and Maya doesn't have *ghunghat* in the proper way. Now she doesn't have ghunghat and she is able to talk to everybody.... After she became involved in politics she left her *ghunghat*, before this I didn't give permission for her to lift her *ghunghat*.' *Choudhary zilla parishad member's father-in-law*

> 'Before I was posted ..., before the election. After the nomination Papaji (meaning her father-in-law) said lift your *ghunghat*. But I was hesitant as it was not sure if I would get the seat, so if I lift my *ghunghat* it could be a problem for the family.' *Zilla parishad member*

This last quote indicates that if she had not won the election it would have been a problem that she had lifted her *ghunghat* but so long as she won it would not be. This particular woman had had a seat as a *ward panch* previously, during which time she said she had started to lift her veil back a little, during the meetings. However, once she was going to stand for this far more senior post it was decided that she should not wear *ghunghat* at all. A woman wearing *ghunghat* is clearly not the appropriate image for a female politician at this level.

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[2] Interestingly other women members of this *gram panchayat* were some of the most politically active of all those I knew.

The divergence between expectations of the types of women who should be political and those who should not is clear in these example. In the first illustration the other members of the *panchayat* had insisted the *sarpanch's ghunghat* was lifted, despite the fact that the majority of them wore *ghunghat* or at least their daughters-in-law and/or wives did. Therefore, while in the context of formal politics it is embarrassing to see a woman in *ghunghat* and symbolic of a woman who is unable to fulfil her political duties, in the context of the family it would be unthinkable for most people that a woman would not wear *ghunghat* in her *sasural*. In the second example, the woman political representative has *been allowed* to abandon the practice of *ghunghat* in both the political and familial realm, but her co sisters-in-law are still practising it. It is necessary for her to leave behind a common practice throughout the community in order that the community elects her. It is essential that she be seen as an exceptional woman as opposed to an average woman.[3]

To conclude these examples demonstrate two things. First, there is a notion that Rajasthani women who conform to cultural and social norms cannot be politically successful. Instead it is required that they adopt certain other behaviours and characteristics. Second, women's political behaviour becomes dependent on them behaving like an imagined 'other' woman. On a more positive note, women's, and in particular poor rural women's, entry into both the types of politics under discussion, is a relatively new phenomenon in this part of India, as such, the expected and the actual ways of behaving as a 'political woman' are still under construction.

5.5 Dichotomous Representations of Women: 'Positive Othering' – 'Negative Othering'

> 'A woman's mind can not work like that of a man's, because she has other problems, she has got her children and she thinks about them. She just goes to attend the meeting and hurriedly she comes back. She has to look after the house. Uneducated women can't go out.' *Former Muslim woman ward panch*

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[3] Interesting Ahikire (2003: 224) researching in Uganda found the reverse for women local councillors elected to reserved seats, who had instead to overtly conform to culturally prescribed feminine behaviour; they were under 'pressures to prove they are "still" women'.

Statements like the one above are indicative of dichotomous conceptualisations of women. The woman speaking begins by referring to all women as incapable of participation in politics, however, by the end of the quote she has clarified this to mean only uneducated women. Uneducated can in this context be read to mean illiterate, rural and frequently poor. It is also interesting to note the contradictions in this woman saying this. She is both uneducated herself and has been a *ward panch*. She had, with encouragement from her husband and community, then stood for election to *sarpanch*, but was unsuccessful. She told me that if she had won the election her son and husband would have done the work. Despite this she criticises the current woman *sarpanch* for not doing any work herself and for not being educated.

There are, of course, various pragmatic reasons which lead people to feel women must be educated to be good political representatives. This is discussed in Chapter Six. However, a woman's status as uneducated is also used as a reason for them not being able to do many other things:

> 'I think it is not good to go alone anywhere and it is also my husband's view. Because this is a very bad time, if an uneducated, illiterate woman goes alone to market or goes to the city anything can happen to her. *Young Rajput former ward panch*

> 'Educated women have four eyes, uneducated have two eyes' *older sangathan member*

> 'We don't let our daughters go out. Like you roam here and there but we don't let our daughters go.... For us uneducated it is wrong.' *Elderly Sangathan member*

> 'Educated women they know everything and they are aware of everything, but the scheduled caste women earlier they didn't know anything and now they know a little.' [4] *Young sangathan member*

This last quote shows the perceived extremities of the differences between two constructs of womanhood. This extreme dichotomy is also present when generalisations are made about villagers and in particular village women:

> 'Like they have their own definition in the *villages*, they don't like the women to go out from their houses and if they don't obey their orders they will hit them and sometimes they will kill them. In the *villages* the women if they have STDs or whatever they can't share their problems with their *sas* [mother-in-law] or their *nanad* [husband's sister] so

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[4] I realise things like this may have been said, at times, because the two women being addresssed, my research assistant and I, are both obviously able to travel and move around independently as well as being educated. However I do not think that this by any means is the total explanation for the number of times rural or urban women presented themselves as different to each other.

sometimes they just kill themselves because they don't have the opportunity to share themselves.' *Male NGO worker*

This quote reveals the way in which village women, which can be read as meaning poor and illiterate as well, are seen to be the ones who suffer from the worst forms of gender discrimination. In this suffering they are presented as different to other women. These dichotomous representations of urban versus rural and educated versus illiterate women serve to deny that middle-class, educated, urban women also suffer gender discrimination and abuse. This discourse then allows for the causes of gender discrimination, suffering and exploitation to be located within the realm of poverty rather than in other factors such as patriliny, exogamous marriage practices, fear of women's sexuality, religious sanctioning of particularly discriminatory acts and so on and so forth.[5]

This was further exemplified to me during a conversation with a woman NGO worker when I suggested that other women from higher castes and classes might benefit from becoming involved in the *sangathan*. This question was interpreted to mean that these wealthier women would be able to help the poor women in some way rather than that they might be able to learn from them and benefit from being members of an organisation with a focus on overcoming gender discrimination.

While I have identified the speakers here as NGO workers, because that was the capacity in which I spoke to them, many could also be identified as village residents. NGO workers from rural backgrounds choose where to locate themselves within this constructed dichotomy between rural and urban. They are strategic in this process. At times presenting themselves as different to the construction of rural people (especially rural women) as ignorant, unworldly and in need of outside assistance. Pigg (1997: 259) discusses this issue in relation to training local people for development projects in Nepal expressing the quandary that 'every time a person with the "local perspective" is enlisted in development work that person switches sides'. At other times NGO workers identify with rural people in the context of an alternative and romanticised construction of poor rural people (especially women) as harbouring a special knowledge or an innate sense of justice. This construction is what I refer to as 'positive othering'. Lastly, NGO

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[5] I do acknowledge the enormous impact poverty has on the way in which women experience gender discrimination.

workers are often proud of their rural backgrounds and feel it puts them in a unique position to be able to do their jobs: they are the same and yet different enough.[6]

In an earlier article Pigg (1992) again writing about Nepal identifies a clear dichotomy of representation between 'the village' and 'the villager' and the developed spaces and people which are everything beyond this. In these representations of Nepal, found everywhere from school books to development manuals as well as in the ways in which people talk and act, the village is essentialised, with all villages becoming an homogeneous whole. The village is presented and imagined to be the counter position to the city, which represents development and modernisation interpreted as progress. While India's political and social history as well as its history of urbanisation is quite different to that of Nepal's, many of the arguments Pigg makes in regard to Nepal also ring true for India.

NGO workers are not the only ones to use constructed identities strategically. Village women take on the identity of the ignorant innocent female stereotype of themselves. They deny responsibility for their actions by claiming ignorance, particularly within the context of the culture of corruption that surrounds the *Panchayat Raj* institutions. I experienced women's use of this identity as a defence more directly. If a woman was frightened of, or for whatever other reason was reluctant to talk to me about either her life, her family or her political role it would at times be told, 'I'm uneducated I don't know anything' or 'I never leave my house; how can I know anything?'. However this strategic use of such concepts of rural women can not be the full explanation as to the way in which women denigrate themselves in this manner. Instead it is apparent that internalised oppression, as discussed in Chapter Two, is also playing a role in the manner in which women perceive and present themselves.

I spoke to middle-class, educated and urban women who are keen to identify themselves as part of an alternative imagined homogeneous group of women and as different to another imagined homogeneous group. This came to light particularly in conversation with women who participated in *panchayats*:

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[6] It is beyond the scope of my research to analyse the particular role of women NGO workers or gender dynamics within NGOs themselves. For recent work which looks at women NGO fieldworkers experiences and institutional gender dynamics in a 'participatory' water supply project in Northwest Rajasthan see O'Reilly (2004). Also see Mosse (2005: 90 – 91).

'*They* don't have much information and *they* don't have much knowledge and *they* don't know how to speak. It's the difference between being brought up in a rural area and in a town. That *Jatni* [woman member of the Jat caste, referring to the current *Sarpanch*] she is not able to read, so what can she learn. Those of us who are from Bikaner, like me we have a different way of living and a different way of wearing clothes.'[7] *Older former ward panch.*

This particular woman was very forthright in stating her superiority and difference to other women. Other examples show how this form of othering is often more subtle. In particular this was the case when speaking to wealthier, well educated women, who often saw themselves as so different to rural women that the need to stress the difference was seen as unnecessary. For example a very wealthy and well educated woman who held a senior position in an NGO, informed me that *all* women are over-ruled by their families. However, within the context of the conversation it was apparent she was not including either herself or I in this category, but instead an unidentified homogenised group of poor or rural women. Later in the conversation she referred to rural women as unpaid serfs and told me that it will take another ten to fifteen years for the *panchayat* reservation to work and for them to become 'modern women'.

The same woman went on to tell me of rural women's wisdom in regard to 'natural cures', 'diseases in cattle' and 'bio-diversity'. This idealised vision of poor rural women has been posited in opposition to the one which portrays them as disempowered illiterates in need of outside influence and education. This idealised version of poor rural Indian women is most prominently found in eco-feminist discourses, notably Shiva (1988) and Mies and Shiva (1993). Sinha, Gururani and Greenberg (1997) locate Shiva's (1988) work within a 'new traditionalist' discourse in which 'pre-colonial Indian society was marked by harmonious social relationships, ecologically sensitive resource use practices, and was generally far less burdened by the gender, economic and environmental exploitation'.[8] They critique this work in three ways: first, as false in

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[7] In Bikaner, as in India more generally, clothes are a significant marker of caste, class and status. Women from different castes wear different styles of dress, and in many cases it is possible to identify a woman's caste group by how she is dressed.

[8] They do , however, acknowledge the way I which this project has highlighted the voice and agency of rural people and women and has highlighted colonial control over resources and challenged India's state management of resources and helped to widen the development discourse beyond conventional economic definitions of development. Agarwal (1991) offers an alternative to formulation to eco-feminism in feminist environmentalism in which she recognises that poor rural women often suffer the most due to environmental degradation and have been agents in environmental protection, but in which women are differentiated according to class, caste, location etc. and local power dynamics both historical and current are taken into consideration.

that its historical legitimacy rests on the examination of femininity as presented in classical Hindu texts which are part of an elite *Brahmanical* tradition and not that of the 'poor forest dwelling' women being referred to. Similarly, 'traditional' societies were 'not only "embedded in nature" but also embedded in social and gender relations that were... relations of dominance and subordination' (ibid: 79). Secondly, identifying women as innately and inextricably connected to nature has and will continue to be used as a reason to dominate them. Third, field work experience and 'evidence' demonstrates that the 'monlithic Indian woman' is yet another myth. Molyneux and Steinberg (1995: 90 – 92) point to how this 'essentialist assertion' is posed in opposition to 'scientific, male, western rationality' in Mies and Shiva's (1993) writings. They point to the dangers in such essentialised oppositional dichotomies for both feminist and anti-imperialist struggles since, '[n]ot only does this formulation erase the considerable differential of power, positionality and experience among women, but it also romanticizes 'the other' in terms which Mies later identifies as a characteristic component of scientific and colonial domination'.[9]

Nanad (2002) points not only to the falseness of the romanticised claims of eco-feminism but also the dangers inherent in such reactionary one-dimensional representations of social groups. She identifies how eco-feminism and other 'new social movements and their anti- modernist intellectual sympathizers end up conferring a seemingly secular, populist and even progressive 'anti-imperialist' gloss on a kind of reactionary nationalism that is no different in substance from the *swadeshi* (self-reliance) platform of the Hindu right' (ibid: 220-21)

Links can be found between the essentialist romanticised conceptualisations of women found in the 'new traditionalism' of eco-feminism, and similar social movements, to the construction of femininity in discourses of the Indian Independence movement. Chatterjjee (1989, 1990, 1993) views Indian nationalist struggle as being based in the realms of the material and the spiritual. The spiritual domain is seen to incorporate cultural identity, literature and the arts, family and familial practices and the realms of the traditional and the private or the home. Writers on gender in the independence struggle (Chatterjee, 1989; Mazumdar, 1994; Sen, 1993; Tharpar, 1989) argue that

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[9] For further critiques of the eco-feminist approach see Jackson (1993), Nanad (1991; 1997)

women became the guardians of the spiritual realm and in this the guardians of not only the national tradition but also the national morality. [10, 11]

The romanticised essentialist representation of Indian women is used strategically and is commonly found in promotional material emanating from civil society organisations, both activist groups and NGOs, located in both the Third World and the West. Monolithic images are presented of poor Third World women often struggling against the forces of oppression in their lives as opposed to images of poor Third World women as victims. Literal images are often included which show (recently) empowered Third World, poor, rural women, speaking into microphones or raising their fists in the air.[12] Saunders (2002: 14) draws attention to the falsity of these representations in opposition:

> 'The strategic discursive exhibition of the empowered Third World woman is no more 'real' than her twin, the contrary figure of the victimised woman'

5.6 Adapting Gender Norms: Adapting To Gender Norms

As illustrated above, both forms of participation being discussed purport to have been designed to radically change women's roles and status in the public arena. However, neither form of participation is <u>overtly</u> concerned with challenging the structural conditions of women's lives in the realm of the family. Likewise, the community in general, on some level, accept women entering the public political arena but do so with the assurance or at least the belief that intra-family roles and relations will continue to conform to existing gender norms.

Women's participation in the public or political realm is tolerated and even incorporated into existing gender roles by two processes. First, objections are appeased by <u>who</u> participates and <u>how</u> they participate. Second, drawing on the idea of exaggerated adaptability as conceptualised in Chapter Three, there is the potential for women's participation to be subsumed within the norms of gender relations. Third, especially in regard to participation in *mahila sangathans* women's empowerment is de-radicalised by positioning it as something external to the realm of the household and family and as

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[10] For a critique of this perspective see Fox (1996)

[11] Banerjee, (2003) provides an interesting analyses of women's adoption of masculinity in present day *Hindutva* organisations.

[12] Note this is not something I found among URMUL Trusts promotional literature or photographs used in their brochures. Instead they manage to depict everyday life in the areas they work and people participating in their schools, health initiatives, and so forth avoiding both stereotypes of victimhood or romanticised images of rural people.

something which will result in no lessening of men's patriarchal power in the family.

The quote below illustrates how the challenges posed by women coming together in the *sangathans* are mitigated through certain processes.

> 'I didn't think about anything before I was involved in the *sangathan* I only did my household work. All I saw was my household work. I was cleaning and carrying and cooking for my children, nothing else. Milking the cow, carrying water and such like. You see Sangeeta [one of her four daughters-in-law] does lots of things in one minute, this is what I was like, there was no time for thinking. Now I have daughters-in-law so there is no worry about the household work, they do the work. Now they are doing the work so I am able to talk to you, otherwise I would not have time.' *Older long standing sangathan member*

The women who are participating, particularly those who could be described as actively participating, are in a particular position in the village and their families. They are frequently older women or women who live in their *pihar*. A few younger women do attend *sangathan* meetings, but in the main they belong to households which have separated from their husband's parents. The Trust reinforces this exclusion of younger women by only allowing one person from each household to take part in any type of paid work which they organise in the village or pay in to the savings scheme which they operate. While I do not think a daughter-in-law who attends a meeting with her mother-in-law would be turned away the common perception is that only one woman from each household can attend and be part of the sangathan.

In many ways participation in both *mahila sangathans* and the *Panchayati Raj* institutions itself attempts to conform as closely as possible to gender norms. This is most clearly seen in the sexual division of space. The very act of forming an organisation for women conforms to gender norms, rather than challenging them. It is usual for men and women to sit separately during *panchayat* meetings and in separate spaces when waiting for meetings to happen. At Nakhtarana *gram panchayat* meetings the women would literally occupy one side of the room and the men the other. One woman *ward panch* explained this to me by saying it is a government rule.

The social norms of Western Rajasthan allow for a complete differentiation of women's behaviour in particular demarcated spaces. It is seen as the norm for Rajasthani women to adopt a different collection of fundamental behaviours according to the place or space

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in which they are. This common acceptance of women's exaggerated adaptability, as discussed in Chapter Three, allows for the idea that while women's gender roles and relations may change in one realm they will not necessarily present a challenge to gender norms in another: changes in gender dynamics in the political realm will not necessarily translate into any change in the domestic realm. For example a woman *sarpanch* explained to me that when visitors come to her house she veils and sits on the floor while they sit on the *mudchar*, even if they are officials who she works with in relation to *panchayat* business. However, she goes on to explain that when she is with these same people at the *panchayat* meetings she sits on a chair at the same level as them, because this is a different situation. Desai (2003: 185-6) relates a very clear example of this switching of identities and behaviours between different places and spaces. She tells the story of a woman agricultural extension worker[13] who sees herself as an outspoken and confident woman, who manages both women's groups and mixed sex groups and advises men and women alike. She works in an NGO which is dominated by men but she is outspoken and shows considerable leadership. She encourages the women she works with to relinquish the practice of ghunghat and supports them in finding a voice. She herself never covers her head in the presence of men, even older men in the context of her work. However, when she herself is in her *sasural* she wears full *ghunghat*. Desai reports that the woman herself saw this as a conflict but also recognised that she had to make a switch from one identity to another.

I saw similar conflicting behaviours among some of the NGO workers I knew. Likewise, NGO workers were often keen to stress that women's involvement in the *sangathans* has not and will not lead to conflict within the realm of the family: processes are always initiated to ensure women's participation is supported by other family members.[14] Whereas caste and class conflict is accepted and seen as an inevitable consequence of caste and class struggles, conflict on gender lines is not seen as a necessary consequence of women's empowerment. This relates to debates within the gender and development literature around whether men lose out as women become empowered, which are discussed in Chapter Two.

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[13] The role of Agricultural Extension Services is to transfer information from research institutions and national development programmes to farmers and to distribute seeds and technological innovations. Their role is also to communicate feedback from the farmers to these institutions. Recently extensions services have started to be privatised, and contracted to the both the profit and not for profit sectors (Desai, 2003: 35).

[14] Bhasin (55) when conducting gender training with groups of male NGO workers found the participants extremely resistant to the idea that women's empowerment would involve any changes happening in the realm of the family.

5.7 Conclusion

The various streams of this chapter can be brought together to make two substantial points. First, an essential requirement for both theory and practice is to further disaggregate women to enable the inclusion of all types of women in the project of women's empowerment. Second, women alone should not be solely responsible for changing detrimental gender regimes.

The chapter discussed what is seen to be appropriate behaviour for political participation and the ways in which the local community, academic literature and civil society organisations represent poor rural women through processes of both positive and negative othering. Particular stereotypes of women are the ones who it is acceptable to find participating in political or public spaces. For most of the community regardless of residence, whether working in NGOs or the political bureaucracy the ideal type is the stereotype of the educated urban woman. For 'progressive' civil society it is often the (recently) empowered rural or poor woman. It is only by deconstructing the dichotomies of educated – illiterate, urban – rural, empowered – victim that it becomes possible for women to participate in political institutions on their own terms.

Further it is necessary to disaggregate women in order to analyse and measure how successful projects of incorporating women into politics, located in both the formal political sphere and civil society. Much attention has been given to disaggregating women along the lines of caste and economic class, however since certain women have always had more access to voice in their families and communities, generation and family position must be taken account of. I do not deny that in the context of Rajasthan even older women and women living in their *pihar* taking part in politics located in civil society and formal political institutions is highly significant. However, I contend that it is only when it becomes acceptable for all women, regardless of status in the family or village or their outward gendered behaviour, to participate will there be a substantial challenge to detrimental gender norms.

My second contention in this chapter is the need to include men in struggles against detrimental gender practices. I have identified three dominant reasons for this. First, while women alone are capable of struggling for and achieving changes in gender hierarchies this is widely recognised to be an extremely slow process. Men's

incorporation into these process and programmes if carefully undertaken could increase the speed at which change happens. Second, while women are participating in all women groups this underpins ideals of sex segregation, reinforcing the prohibition of women's voices in mixed sex spaces. All the training sessions I am aware of for women *Panchayati Raj* representatives are women only sessions, despite the fact that many first time male representatives are in as much need of training, and the reality that women political representative have to interact and raise their voices in mixed sex spaces in order to participate effectively. Third, this exclusion of men from issues of gender and development leads to a reinforcement of the sexual and generational division of labour. Certain tasks particularly those related to reproduction, health and child welfare are confirmed as the sole responsibility of women. Likewise, certain detrimental practices and behaviours, for instance male violence, women are inadvertently assumed to be responsible for struggling against. [15]

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[15] In recent years men have organised to challenge the sexual and domestic violence faced by women, notably *Puntos de Envuentro* in Mexico (Chant with Craske, 2003: 240)

CHAPTER SIX

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN *PANCHAYATI RAJ*: CHARACTERISTICS AND OUTCOMES

6.1 Introduction

The main focus of this chapter is the experiences of women *panchayat* representatives and their families. However, it does draw on corresponding information regarding members of village *sangathans*. I do not specifically investigate concrete measures of 'successful' participation in the *panchayats*, for example how many development schemes were effectively implemented under the tenure of a woman *sarpanch*.[1] Instead I focus on factors enabling and hindering women's effective participation in *Panchayati Raj* Institutions and on thoughts, feelings and perceptions of women's participation coming from both women representatives themselves and the wider community. The rationale for focusing on attitudes towards women's participation is that a change in the way gender roles and relations are perceived is fundamental to any change in gender dynamics and consequently in women's and men's status relative to one another.

From voices at academic seminars to those of political representatives and NGO workers it is common to hear it iterated that women are not really participating in the *panchayat* institutions, but are merely proxies for their husbands.[2] While this may be true in some cases, as a generalisation it is not only inaccurate but also highly disparaging to the women involved, many of whom are struggling to have their voices heard. This chapter demonstrates it is most usually neither a case of women doing nothing and their husbands doing all the political work or that a woman is only effective and fully participating in politics if she acts in isolation from her family members. Instead examples in which husbands and wives are working together are common. For illiterate women especially family support is often an essential requisite.

The chapter begins by exploring decision-making processes which lead to particular women standing for election. It shows how the decision is always a family decision. This is demonstrated as important in influencing the levels of support women receive

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[1] Mayaram and Pal (1996) and Mayaram (2000) provide this information for a selection of *panchayat* representatives in three districts in Rajasthan.
[2] Buch (2000) makes the point that many of these sweeping statements were based on research that was done when women had only had their seats for a limited time period and which gave no allowance for a learning phase for these women. (she cites Leiten (1997) and Mishra, Kumar and Pal (1997)).

from their family members once they have gained their seats. How election processes are experienced by women representatives and their families are also considered.

The next section discusses various factors influencing the effectiveness of women's participation. These range from personal characteristics through the support received from others, whether family members, NGOs or other *panchayat* representatives, to the culture of the *panchayat* institution she is a member of. A woman's participation is greatly prejudiced by the culture and structure of the *panchayat* body she has a seat in. It is also significantly affected by their familial relationships and the family's relationship to village politics.

The third section discusses the relationship between gender dynamics at the family and household level and individual member's participation. It raises often neglected information as to the familial nature of politics regardless of whether a male or a female member is the political representative.

The final section looks at how both women and the wider community feel about women's entry in to the public political realm. It draws on research conducted in relation to participation in both *Panchayati Raj* institutions and the *mahila sangathans*. It highlights the pride women and their families feel about women's political participation. It discusses opinions on women's right to participate in local politics and how this relates to the quota system as well as how women's performance in both *panchayats* and *sangathans* is perceived.

Despite having discussed corruption to some extent in Chapter Four, it is impossible for the 'culture of corruption' in the research area not to be raised again due to its influence on women's ability to participate and general attitudes towards their participation. Obviously it is not only women whose participation is influenced by a 'culture of corruption'. [3]

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[3] It is important to note more generally that it is not only women's experiences and levels of participation in the *panchayats* which vary considerably. The reservation for 'scheduled castes' (SC), 'scheduled tribes' (ST) and 'other backward castes' (OBC) has meant certain groups of men are also entering the *panchayat* institutions for the first time. Although I did not study men representatives' experiences in depth I met many and witnessed many participating in meetings or in informal ways in the villages. I also heard stories about different male *sarpanches* and opinions on how they executed their duties.

6.2 Family Decision Making And Election Processes

Several factors contribute to explaining why a particular woman stands for election. It is almost always a decision made by various family members rather than by an individual member. The amount of input a particular family member has in the decision varies from them having no say at all to them being seen as the person responsible for making the final decision, even if in consultation with others.

I acknowledge that the reasons given to me, as to why a particular woman had stood for election may not have always been the full story. Partial truths are used to present a woman and the family in the best possible light. For instance I was often told that a woman stood for election because the community had asked her to or her family. In this way political tenure is presented as something which is taken on as a service to the community, at the community's request. This is not to say that some political representatives, both men and women, are not motivated to fulfil their political role to the best of their ability in order to serve the community and make improvements in their villages.

A further difficulty posed in assessing reasons for assuming political tenure is the way in which a woman may present the decision as being beyond her control in order to conform to culturally prescribed norms of women's dependency on older male family members.

Despite the complexities involved in making decisive interpretations of these multi-layered accounts, I identify four categories of rationale motivating and justifying the decision that a particular woman should stand for election to a *panchayat* body. Some of these are related to different communities' wishes in regard to who their political representatives should be, and others are concerned with family aspirations to hold political office. These two perspectives of course interact and mutually influence the decision making process, as well as the way in which those recounting their experiences describe this process. This exploration provides an understanding of the ways in which gender norms, family aspirations and class and caste structures intertwine and influence the political behaviour of both candidates and voters.

According to the first rationale a woman is chosen because the community believe her to be the woman most capable of doing the job. That is someone who is seen as the best candidate within the constraints of the quota system in relation to both sex and caste. The second, third and fourth categories of rationale, in contrast to this, arise out of the general status of or perceptions regarding a woman's family. In these instances it becomes the family rather than the individual woman who to all intents and purposes being voted for. The second rationale applies to women who come from families who have traditionally been politically powerful, or influential in the village, and have had previous involvement in formal politics. The third rationale speaks about communities' general opinions of the family as a whole or a particular male member of that family. The fourth rationale is inextricably linked to the parallel reservation of seats on the *Panchayat bodies* for particular caste groups, whereby a powerful family attempts to place another family, who are eligible to hold office, as their proxy representatives. These rationales are explored in more detail below with illustrations.

6.2.1 Fulfilling The Wishes Of The Community

The reasons given as to why a woman would make a good political representative are always expressed in terms of either her ability to speak, as discussed in Chapter Five, or her educational status. Both of these facets are seen as essential qualifications for effective political participation by nearly all those I spoke with in the villages as well as political representatives and their families who are based in Bikaner itself. Despite the stress on these two attributes the women and their families for whom the wishes of the community are the primary impetus to stand for election came from all social, economic and caste backgrounds. One example is Parvatiji, a *ward panch* living on the outskirts of Nakhtarana, in a squatter settlement of *Bhat* people. Her seat was one both reserved for a woman and an OBC (other backward caste) person. Parvatiji and her community had migrated from Jodphur to Bikaner district approximately twenty years ago, when she was newly married, in search of work. She had had no formal education. She told me the community had selected her because she speaks well.

In contrast to this Mayaji a woman who came from a very wealthy Choudhary family explained the reason the community had wanted her to stand for election:

'When the seat came to the village, the quota, there were no educated women in the village[4]

so they said "she is educated and she is the right person"'

These women are seen to be qualified for political work because they have the very qualities which are not seen to be the norm for women in this area; i.e. they are either educated or outspoken. Women who are perceived as qualified to participate in 'formal' politics are therefore also 'exceptional women', as discussed in Chapter Five.

It is important to add that the qualifications of education and the ability to speak in public although dominating discourses around the skills needed for political participation were combined with other attributes such as a sense of justice and a desire to help others:

'It was mainly decided by the ward members, they selected her... because they thought she is always honest and she will help us and she will sort out our problems.' *Husband of previous session ward panch*

One former ward *panch*, Meena *Bai*, presented a partially alternative notion to that of exceptional women being seen as the best political representatives. She explained the reasons for her selection as being strongly related to her successful conformity to gender norms and institutions:

'They told us to make a *ward panch*. Some of the villagers spent money for the *ward panch* seat but they [other villagers] said no. They decided that the woman who is well adjusted in her *sasural* and who has made a good balance between her *sasural* and *pihar* and who is eligible and who is well informed, we will give the seat to this woman.... I have never told a lie and I am a straightforward kind of woman and I am more aware than others. All the villagers gave their votes to me.'

Meena does still see herself as different to other women since she believes she is more aware than them. Although she was the only woman to explicitly give conformity as a reason for election or selection, it was at times implied that while exceptionality is expected, this has its limits or needs to be contained.

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[4] Maya herself did not actually live in the village where she was *Sarpanch* but as was the case with other middle class representatives she lived in Bikaner town but still had a family home and many family members in the village.

6.2.2 The Woman Comes From An Established Political Family

> 'My family have always been involved in politics. My grandfather was the *choudhary* (*treasurer*) in the village and my father was *sarpanch* for thirty years and after that I was the *sarpanch*. Then I left the position and it went to some other person, but he was not able to earn the respect that my family have had. So the villagers wanted someone from my family to come in to power and so they made my wife become *sarpanch*.' *Husband of previous session sarpanch*

This quote illustrates how the decision that this man's wife would stand for election was entirely influenced by the political position the family has held previously. All of those who fell in to this category were from wealthy families and high caste groups.

While the rationale for this family standing for election to political office is clear, why a particular woman in the family is chosen needs further explanation. The preference is determined not only by the woman's position and status in the family but also by her individual skills and abilities, which may in the event have an overriding influence. An individual woman, regardless of her generational position maybe thought of as especially well qualified for political office, as the father-in-law of a woman in a particularly influential political position explained to me:

> 'It was mainly my decision, because I had been involved in politics. So when the seat was reserved for a woman... all the members decided 'now it is time to select a woman for the seat'. They all decided 'because you have a daughter in law in your house and she is literate, educated, so she must be our candidate.'... Because she is more educated than the others. All the other daughter-in-laws have ghunghat so they are not able to talk to everybody but she doesn't have ghunghat in the proper way' *Father-in-law of zilla parishad member*

6.2.3 Women From Trusted And Respected Families

In this category it is a request from the community that anyone from a particular family stand for election. The justification presented is located in the belief that a certain family or a particular male member of that family would serve the community well. Unlike the first category, in which a woman is chosen because it is a woman's seat and therefore a suitably qualified woman is looked for, in these examples it is the family or a particular male member of the family who are seen as suitably qualified. The fact that it is a woman from the family who would actually hold the seat is secondary in importance, as these two quotes explain:

'At that time the whole village wanted it. They agreed on my name and they thought that Ramdevar is a good man and he will do the right work for the village.... I didn't do any work like a campaign, all the villagers did all the work because at first I refused the proposal I was not interested, but they told me that there is not another able person so we want you to stand for election.' *Husband of a previous session sarpanch responding to a question asked about why his wife stood for election.*

'We all of us selected her uncontested, *sadh, sansi, meghwal, khati,* all castes were with us.... They thought they (the electorate) would give their votes to me but because it is a woman's seat she had to stand. They thought he is a good man and a good family and they will do something for us, he will work for us.' *Husband of current session ward panch*

Those in this category are most likely to be standing for a seat reserved on both the basis of caste and sex.

6.2.4 Families Selected As Proxies

This category is closely linked to the quota for different caste groups and occurs when those who are traditionally powerful in the village support a woman from the caste group who have a reserved seat in order that they maintain power and influence, by controlling her and her family. Or alternatively the *sarpanch* may support the candidature of a woman to ensure he has sufficient allies within the *panchayat.* It was at times very difficult to see who would fall into such a grouping since people are unlikely to admit to being in this position.[5] Nevertheless, Neelaji, a *sansi* woman *ward panch* did tell me this much:

'We don't say anything to them [*sarpanch, gram sevak and their cronies*] and they don't say anything to us. They just want our signature and we give our sign.... *Sarpanch* and *upsarpanch* they take our signature and they tell us you can go to your house.... Pushpa Devi's [the *Sarpanch*] husband Mhegram... he told the whole family [to stand for election]. To begin with I was scared, but they said we'll give you money we'll give you a house, we'll give you work.'

Others also reported this phenomenon:

'If it is a reserved seat then there are people with money who make other people contest the election. Like if there is one reserved seat and it has been reserved for me and I don't have any money then the other people who have got money they will make another person contest the election.' *Husband of former ward panch*

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[5] As discussed in Chapter Four Mohini Bai of Kekri panchayat was elected under these circumstances.

This section has outlined the key rationale informing decisions to field particular women as candidates. However, other motivating factors are important as well, such as personal material gain or personal desire to hold office for the status and esteem it brings and the desire to serve ones own community.

It can be seen that the decision to stand for election is normally a family based[6] decision. Likewise, in many examples the family as a whole is perceived as being the representative. From a less positive perspective some families had no objection to a woman from the family being elected as her tenure is seen as only being a formality to conform to the exigencies of the reservation system rather than according her any real power.

6.3 Election Processes

Two things are notable concerning women's electioneering. First, many women do not actually fight an election campaign. Second, how much involvement a woman has in her own election campaign varies considerably.

Instead of fighting an election campaign almost half of the women I spoke to told me they stood for election uncontested. In some cases other women had initially put themselves forward for election but community members talked them in to standing down before the election. In other examples the ward community, would decide on who they wanted to be the *ward panch* and then approach that woman's family. As a consequence other women would not stand for election, knowing that they could not possibly win. However, with one exception, a woman member of the *zilla parishad*, all the examples of women who had been elected uncontested were *ward panches*. All the *sarpanches*, *samiti* level members, and *zilla parishad* members I spoke with did fight election campaigns. An assumption can be drawn that the larger the constituency and the more power invested in the position the more likely it is that an election campaign will be fought. Furthermore, it is easier to imagine the members of a particular ward of a *gram panchayat*, in one area of a village, coming together to decide who should be their *ward panch* rather than relying on the uncertainty of the formal election to determine the outcome.

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[6] By calling the decision a family based decision this is not to say it is made in an egalitarian manner, see discussion on family power dynamics in Chapter Two.

Avoiding the necessity of an election campaign has a number of advantages. Of course fighting elections can cost individual families a lot of money. Nevertheless, what is presented as a more pertinent concern is the shame associated with losing an election. These quotes exemplify how the fear of the shame associated with losing an election effects people's decisions. They also illustrate how it is only with the assurance that a woman will win an election that her *sasural* family in the first instance and her *pihar* family in the second permit her to stand.

> 'If there are two contestants on one seat then obviously there are two groups, so one is running after their votes and one is running after their votes, so if we lose our seat it could be shameful for us'. *Husband of previous session ward panch*

> 'I am telling the truth he thought that they would make fools of us he thought they will stand another candidate and we will lose our seat and so it is a question of our family reputation.' *Previous session Rajput woman ward panch*

> 'Her brothers they came here and said how can she stand for election if she loses the seat it is a question of our family's reputation. If she loses it will be shameful, so we will not give permission for her to stand for election. They came fifteen people they came from her *pihar* and they wanted to take her with them, because they didn't want her to stand for election.' *Husband of previous session Rajput ward panch*[7]

Those who did have to fight an election campaign were involved in the campaigning themselves to various degrees. Some women told me they did nothing and their husbands or the community members did all the campaigning for them. The majority who did have to fight an election were involved in the campaign to some extent. By far the most common activity they took part in was going door to door talking to the electorate. Once again the higher up the political hierarchy the seat they were contesting the more competitive the campaign and consequently the more involved the woman tended to be. However, campaigning is always a family affair whereby a woman and her husband and other family members take joint responsibility for it, as this *Brahmin woman samiti* level representative explains:

> 'I used to cook in the morning and then we used to go out. We would come back in the afternoon and then go out again and then come back and cook dinner.... We used to go to each house and do *namaste* and touch their feet and ask for votes and this went on for five or six days, me and my husband.... I used to go with the women and he used to go with the

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[7] I have unfortunately not been able to establish whether there is more shame attached to a female family member losing an election than a male family member. Does fear around the shame in losing an election hamper women's entry in to politics anymore than it might men's?

men and we used to go everywhere. If he went that side then I would go this side. We shared our work.'

Election process could be learning point and the beginning of a woman's political development, but many women, for the different reasons cited above, do not actually play a significant role in these processes. Consequently, their first experience of political manoeuvrings is at the first meeting they attend. Up until and in some cases past this point it is possible for a woman to be 'protected' from public political activity.

6.4 Factors Constraining And Factors Encouraging Women's Participation

Using the broad understanding of what being political means, discussed in Chapter One, and the ethnographic material presented in Chapter Three, it is possible to see in the context of rural Bikaner that what could be described as actions with little meaning are in reality great political steps. A woman, and in particular a daughter-in-law, leaving the confines of her residence to attend a meeting is a political act in itself. As I was often told: 'It is a big step women coming out of their houses'. One woman when telling me what the benefits of the reservation would be explained:

> 'Women think that the government has done an excellent job so that we are able to go and see Kotla Mandir (tehsil head-quarters and small town about sixteen kms. from her village), because most of the women haven't been there, so they think it is a good thing.' *Previous session middle-aged woman ward panch*

There was no doubt in my mind as I walked to the *gram panchayat* meeting with Parvatiji that she was making a political statement. Parvatiji the *Bhat* woman from Jodphur introduced at the beginning of this chapter had invited me to her home for breakfast prior to the meeting. She showed me the damage to her only brick room, caused by the recent sudden and heavy rainfall. Then we sat in the *jhopanri,* which had survived the rains, and ate *roti* and chillies for breakfast, before leaving for the meeting. Despite having told me that her husband always accompanies her to meetings, and this having been what I had witnessed on previous occasions, this morning he just shouted after her to come straight back. (Which she didn't because we went for tea after the meeting). As Parvatiji proudly walked through the area of the community she represented, to the *gram panchayat* meeting, the significance of this simple walk was obvious to both her and I, as was the potential force of the activity she was embarking on.

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A number of encouraging and discouraging or constraining factors are identified as impacting upon women's levels of participation in *Panchayati Raj* institutions. Some of these I describe as institutional. That is they are brought about by the functioning and makeup of a particular *panchayat*. Others I describe as social in that they are symptoms of a woman's position in social structures and hierarchies.

6.4.1 Institutional Constraints And Enabling Factors

Any form of participation by the members of a *panchayat* is highly constrained by the manner in which a particular *panchayat* body operates. This institutional behaviour is to a large degree determined by the conduct of those who hold the power to influence how a *panchayat* functions. For example, in a *gram panchayat,* officially this is the *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak*. The power of these actors is circumscribed by others who hold positions of influence, such as more senior government officials and those who are customarily powerful in a particular village or community group. The amount of power politicians have, is similarly limited by their knowledge of the political and administrative system.

One of the most significant obstacles to comprehensive participation faced by *gram panchayat* members is that in many villages meetings are not held on a regular basis. Of the four *gram panchayats* I studied only one regularly held the two meetings a month that are required by law.[8] This particular village, Nakhtarana, is administratively classified as a rural area but to all intents and purposes is a small town, and is the *tehsil* headquarters. It has, comparatively, a very large number of *ward panches*, over forty, making it the largest *gram panchayat* in the district. These two factors have led to its functioning being under greater public scrutiny. Likewise, the *panchayat* members in comparison to their counterparts in poorer and more remote villages have higher levels of education and political literacy. As such, they are in a better position to ensure that the basic legal requirements of the *panchayat* body are adhered to.[9]

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[8] How ever the quarterly *gram sabha* meetings did seem to take place.
[9] Despite this it became obvious during the time I spent talking to members of this *panchayat* and other residents of the area that there was a commonly held view that the *sarpanch* and her husband are corrupt. Since returning to the UK I have been told that under the leadership of the woman *upsarpanch* charges have indeed been brought against the *sarpanch*.

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In the other villages I worked in almost every time I tried to attend meetings I would arrive at the *panchayat bhavan* (*panchayat* offices) to find that the meeting had been cancelled. The explanations given for this were usually as simple as 'meetings never happen in this village', 'the meeting was/is yesterday/tomorrow', and 'meetings only happen if a high up official is coming'. Pai (2000) also reports for one district in Uttar Pradesh that no *gram panchayat* meetings had taken place.

The frustration I felt at this situation reflected that felt by many of the *ward panches* and their families. The husband of a young *Khati* woman *ward panch* explained their situation to me:

> 'No one listens to us, nobody hears us. Two or three times I have said to the *gram sevak*
> and the *sarpanch* "look the village people have this problem" but nobody tries to listen to
> us nobody has the time.... I said to him [the *sarpanch*] "why in six months do you have
> only one meeting and you take innocent people's signatures on the papers. What is the
> work? What is going on? You do not tell us anything". No information.... [There have
> been] only two meetings in one and a half years'.

I have often wondered if I would have witnessed more meetings if I had informed the *sarpanch* or the *gram sevak* of a particular *gram panchayat* that I wanted to attend in advance. If knowing that I was hoping to attend the meeting would they have ensured that it was organised? Similarly, since people in the villages generally knew what I was interested in perhaps a number a women representatives would also have been encouraged to attend, who otherwise would not have. This being so, to what extent would this have then affected my understanding of women's participation? The fact that my attendance at two meetings, one *gram sabha* and one *gram panchayat* meeting, which I did manage to attend, was reported in the local press indicates that at least some effort would have been gone to. The choices I made in regard to not making an official request to attend meetings raises ethical considerations in regard to seeking people's consent to me observing. I attempted to overcome these by informally always asking at least one of the women *gram panchayat* members if they or anyone else would have an objection to me coming to a meeting at some point. I would of course always seek a generalised acceptance of my presence on the actual day. In the main people seemed pleased that interest was being shown in the operation of their *panchayat*. However, at one meeting a male *ward panch* asked the other members, in reference to me, 'why are

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you giving the *panchayat* secrets away?' but somebody else responded 'it is public money so no secrets'.[10]

It is generally recognised that much *panchayat* politics is in reality done in informal spaces women are excluded from, as pointed out in Chapter Four. The disenfranchisement of women politicians is nevertheless compounded by a reality in which even the official spaces in which the quota system allows for women's presence are repeatedly made non-existent. It is important to acknowledge the impact this has on women's potential to participate and on any change that might be brought about in gender relations due to their participation. A system of reservation can only enforce official representation of women in politics. In many cases this amounts to no more than them signing or putting their thumbprints to documents brought to them in their houses by the *sarpanch* or *gram sevak* and their cronies, and in some cases it does not even amount to this!

I was fortunate to spend some time with a woman *ward panch*, Kamala *Devi* a woman in her early forties who had, with the support of local NGO workers, resisted this type of behaviour. This is how she explained her fight against the practice of bogus meetings in her village *panchayat*:

> 'The *sarpanch* and the *gram sevak* had false meetings and they wrote down our signatures, all the ward members signatures, and they gave approval for the works that were not done. But I saw those papers and I said we did not attend that meeting.... I wrote down all the things, what happened in the meetings and when they held false meetings and when they took our false signatures. Then at the next meeting when they wanted our signature on the register, I looked at the register and I saw that they hadn't organised a meeting on that day so how could we have given our signature? Then I snatched the register and ripped it out.... Then I wrote a letter and gave it to the BDO [Block Development Officer], saying that they organised a false meeting and nobody attended the meeting and they had our false signatures.'

Kamala was successful in the actions she took against the *sarpanch* as well as extremely proud of her achievements. Nevertheless, her experiences have not encouraged her to continue her involvement in formal politics. Kamala and her family are *Rajputs* and reasonably comfortable economically. She is relatively well educated, has a seemingly supportive husband and family, experience of formal politics and a declared aim in life

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[10] This was a meeting held in Kekri village shortly after the corruption charges had been brought against the previous *sarpanch*.

to help the community. Despite these dynamics Kamala was not willing to stand for election to *sarpanch*, when many villagers requested it:

'They came here lots of times to insist that I become *sarpanch*, but I said, "in politics there is lots of corruption and fraud. I am not interested in becoming a *sarpanch*, I know their work they are all thieves, they are immoral".... If I became *sarpanch* afterwards everyone would want to eat the money and steal the money from the government side and I'm not able to do these types of things.... the whole system is corrupt, so how could I fight with them. One woman alone is not able to fight with them because everywhere there is the net of cronies.'

Kamala's story exemplifies how there is potential, particularly when support and encouragement are provided, for people to fight against the institutional limitations to their participation. Kamala had received considerable support and encouragement from a local NGO. As such it is important to stress at this juncture how important civil society organisations can be in enabling women to challenge these institutional limitations. Conversely Kamala's story also illustrates how perceptions of the way in which local politics is conducted discourages women, as it does some men, from participating.

Support and encouragement can be found within the *panchayat* body itself. Whether the *sarpanch* is a woman and the performance of other women representatives is influential in terms of women's capacity or willingness to involve themselves in their political role more fully. For example, one village *ward panch,* explained to me that she didn't go to the meetings because she felt there was no point and she didn't understand anything. She went on to say that there were only three women on the *panchayat* and only one attends meetings, anyway.

There does seem to be a correlation between the sex of the *sarpanch* and the levels of participation of women representatives. A woman, who had been *sarpanch* during the previous session explained,

'This year there is not a woman *sarpanch* in the *gram panchayat* so only the men go to the meetings.'

In Nakhtarana *gram panchayat,* where both the *sarpanch* and the *upsarpanch* are women, there is a comparatively high level of participation exhibited by women members. Of course some of the other factors I have described above in regard to this *panchayat,* are also influential. The support which the women offered each other, if only

in terms of there always being a group of them who sit together before meetings began (which are always delayed), is obviously of great importance.

In the main having a larger number of women on a *panchayat* and having a woman *sarpanch,* or in the rare example a woman *upsarpanch,* encourages women's participation. Contrary to this the behaviour of other women can limit an individual woman's own perceived ability to become more involved in *panchayat* business. For example one woman *ward panch* told me she could not speak because the *sarpanch* who is also a woman does not speak. However, it is unlikely that this woman would have even been attending meetings if the *sarpanch* had not been a woman. Datta (1998: 119-20) points to the fact that the women on the *panchayats* researched for her book all belonged to all women panchayats and this collective voice was significant in enabling the effective participation of individual women.

Even while the reservation for women is opening doors for women to enter politics a perceived restriction on which seats women can stand for election to is being constructed. Seats reserved for women are called 'women's seats' with the other two thirds of seats being commonly referred to as 'men's seats'. Women are therefore becoming in the popular imagination excluded from these 'men's seats', as this quote from a woman member of a *sangathan* explains, as she talks about her husband's attempts to be elected:

> 'My husband proposed that if everybody does not agree on my name then give my wife's name, give Roshni *Bai's* name. But everybody said it is not a woman's seat so a man should stand for election.'

Consequently, both women who have and those who have not held office previously do not, in the main, consider standing for election to a general seat. Therefore, as the quota system rotates and a 'woman's seat' becomes a general seat again, almost without exception, women feel they should not stand for election because it is the 'turn of a man'. I do acknowledge that prior to the reservation it was most probably assumed that all the seats on a *panchayat* body were 'men's seats'.

Again, I use the example of Nakhtarana *panchayat* to exemplify how the reservation does inspire women to continue in politics. Four of the women who had been *ward panches* during the 1995 – 2000 session had gone on to stand for election to the seat of *sarpanch* for the following session. They had felt sufficiently confident and politically

inspired as well as encouraged by their families. They were also fortunate enough that the position of *sarpanch* was reserved for a woman in their village the following term. Unfortunately, none of these women were successful in their attempt and feel angry and bitter towards the woman who had won and the system which had allowed her to win. There are two reasons for this anger, first, the belief that the family who won had rigged the election. Second, the woman who is *sarpanch* played no active role in the *Panchayat* beyond silently attending meetings.

Alongside the problems of a shifting quota system and the common idea of now having men's and women's seats is the way in which women representatives are not recognised as fully entitled politicians. Instead women are often seen as just the 'reservation women' rather than politicians with an equal status to male politicians, who have been elected to general seats. Or as Kishwar (1996) puts it:

> '[A]ccepting the present 33 percent permanent reservation for women is like demanding that some seats be reserved in every bus for women or the equivalent of a *zenana dabba* (ladies compartment) in every train. Men then come to expect women to remain confined to the ladies section and assume that all the rest of the seats are reserved for them... a sure way to perpetually ghettoise women's politics.'

6.4.2 Social And Individual Factors Which Encourage Or Constrain Participation

This section considers social structures and dynamics restricting women's effective participation. It also highlights examples of women who have managed to overcome such difficulties and are recognised as active members of the *panchayat* body they were elected to.

The segregation of space according to sex is of importance here. As pointed out in Chapter Five men and women conform to the norm of the sexual segregation of space at the *gram panchayat* meetings. This arrangement made it easy for male members to ignore the female contingent of representatives. When the men are speaking, and at times the women who did speak during these meetings, they only addressed their concerns and questions to the *sarpanch's* table and the male side of the room. Being ignored or overlooked can have an extremely disempowering effect on a person. Despite this a number of the women *ward panches* did repeatedly try to raise their concerns and demands, however those who I spoke to feel they are not listened to.

Due to the implementation of the reservation for women the vast majority of women have entered local politics with no previous experience and lack knowledge of how the institutions operate and what their responsibilities are. Many of them are also illiterate. Education is repeatedly referred to by both *Panchayati Raj* representatives themselves and the communities they represent as an essential prerequisite for political participation. Other research looking at women's participation in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions comes to the same conclusions (Bryld; 2001, Kudva; 2003, Kondreday; 2000; Pai, 1998, 2000). However, Mayaram (2000) although acknowledging literacy as important does not see it as essential. In her research on women in three districts in Rajasthan she came across both women who were literate and inactive and women who are illiterate and active. This may be the case but my experience has been that those who are best able to handle *panchayat* affairs are educated. More importantly illiterate women are in a particularly vulnerable position. This is starkly illustrated by Mohini *Devi's* case where she was arrested on charges of corruption relating to documents that she can not even read. Nevertheless, I did speak to a good number of women who were keen to participate and levelled their inability to do so at the door of corruption rather their own lack of education or literacy.

The literature cites time restraints and domestic responsibilities as difficulties for women in undertaking their *panchayat* work (Bryld, 2001; Desai and Thakkar, 2001; Mayaram, 2000). However, this was rarely presented to me. When asked about this I was told that on the day they go to meetings and can be away for a long time other family members take over these tasks if necessary. It is uncommon for households not to have other women members who can take over these domestic responsibilities. Older women generally have daughter-in-laws who take on most of the domestic work anyway. I found the same for women who were participating in the *sangathans*. In a number of examples women and their family members told me that sons, husbands or mother-in-laws undertook these tasks in their absence. Household work overall does not appear to be a factor constraining women's participation.

Personal attributes also influence a woman's ability and desire to participate in politics. People I spoke to frequently located a woman's behaviour in her individual characteristics. It was common to hear that a woman is a *himmati* (bold) woman, implying a confident outspoken woman. This is used in a positive light, as this woman *sarpanch* alludes to when talking about the other women on her *panchayat*:

'Only three of them spoke the others used to remain silent.... It depends on the individuality of the person. If she is <u>bold</u> then she catches on fast, if she is not <u>bold</u>. It depends on the nature of that person.'

Although, education and generation and status in the family may have contributed to this, at other times particular characteristics could only be attributed to personal circumstances and development. For example, one very confident outspoken woman I knew was the only daughter in a family with a large number of sons. Unlike many girl children it is possible to presume that she was very much a wanted girl child, who may well have been given a good deal more attention in the family than other girls with several sisters. This discussion, however, is perhaps best left to individualistic, psychoanalytical exploration which is beyond both the skills of the researcher and the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, it is important to note that individual experience although structured by social constraints and enablers has important ramifications for women's behaviour. In a similar vein individual examples of 'bold' women prove that even within a particularly restrictive social system in regard to women's gendered behaviour there is space for women to adapt cultural norms and find a different way of being, without being ostracised by either community or family.

It is critical to draw attention to the few women *ward panches* I was introduced to who were physically or mentally incapacitated to the extent that any form of effective participation in their *panchayats* would have been virtually impossible. In the main this was due to old age. For the same reasons it was also not feasible for me to discuss with them the nature of their participation in the *panchayat*s or other aspects of their lives. Despite this, I think it is safe to assume that these women would have indeed been proxy representatives for a male family member. There are also very worrying implications here regarding the lack of control or authority these women have over any actions being done in their name.

In one of these cases, that of a *Nayak* family, the woman's husband was to all intents and purposes the *ward panch*. To the extent that he used his thumb print instead of hers on official *panchayat* documents. This case, however, raises important issues in regard to the reservation. First, this man was the person wanted by his ward to be their representative. Second, he did indeed seem to be concerned for the welfare of the community and was always present and participating at the meetings I attended (or waiting with us for meetings which didn't happen!). Third, it may indeed have been

difficult to find a woman who would have been able or willing to participate to any greater extent than his wife within the restrictions of the quota system.

6.4.3 Women Who Participate More Effectively

Despite the large number of constraining factors women face I spoke to a limited number who feel they have or are making achievements in their villages and communities. Meenakshi is known for the things she achieved during her term of office as a *samiti* level representative. She is a *Rajput* woman in her early forties with two sons. She is educated to eighth standard and lives in Bikaner, which is her *pihar*. When she had her seat she spent most of her time in her *sasural*. This is the area she was representing. Her husband's family are wealthy land owners who have traditionally been powerful in the village.

Despite Meenakshi's exceptional educational standard for a woman of her generation from Bikaner district and her personal characteristics of self confidence she still conforms, to varying degrees, to *Rajput* gender norms as this quote from her demonstrates:

> 'How could I speak in front of my *sasur* (father-in-law). Now I can talk but at that time I couldn't. I was in *ghunghat*.... In front of elder family members we don't speak.'

Regardless of these obvious restrictions in the context of the family Meenakshi achieved a great deal during her political tenure and had also been inspired to continue working to support the people in the villages she had represented:

> 'When I was elected I maintained good links with everyone. We opened a fodder depot. If there was a police case, the people would rely on me. So now also if they have some kind of problem some kind of work then they tell me and I can meet the police, the collector anyone because they know me.... While I was on the panchayat I did a lot of work for the villages. I made canals for water. There was no electricity in the village and for every electricity pole the electricity board people were demanding RS 1,000. From each person they were demanding Rs. 1,000. I wrote to **** (MP Bikaner) in detail about the village problems and situation and he wrote to the collector and the collector wrote to the electricity board and they put the electricity poles in the village free of charge.'

Poonam *Devi* a *Choudhary* woman who also lives in Bikaner, which is neither her *pihar* or her *sasural*, is in her early fifties. She has three adult sons, one of whom, with his wife, lives with Poonam and her husband. Poonam like Meenakshi is well educated, having passed standard ten. Of significance, also, is her husband's family were social

reformers and Poonam was married with neither *ghunghat* or *dowry*. Poonam's father was involved in the Independence struggle and she is a member of the Congress party. Poonam had stood for election to *samiti* level in 1995 but had been unsuccessful. She won her seat on the *zilla parishad* in 2000. She explained to me how she felt about her political position:

> 'There are no big difficulties. We are informed of the meetings fifteen days in advance. We prepare our questions. In the meeting most of the relevant officials are there and we raise our questions and then the officials tell us yes we can do that or yes we can look after that problem. If then they do not do the work we raise the same question again in the next meeting and then if the problems are not sorted out there is a debate in the meeting. But it is easy it is not a big problem.'

Another example of a woman who is successful and powerful in her political role is Bimlaji, a Jain woman in her mid thirties with three sons. Unlike the previous two women mentioned she is from a poorer family, but educated to fifth standard. Her husband works in a small tea-stall-cum-restaurant and she does private sewing jobs for other people in her home. They live in an old stone house in Nakhtarana which is owned by her mother-in-law who also lives with them. Bimla and her mother-in-law have a good and seemingly egalitarian relationship. Two of Bimla's sons, who are still at school, live with them and one son is living in Nepal and working in a factory owned by a relative. Bimla had been elected to Nakhtarana *panchayat* in 2000. Subsequently she had been elected by the other members of the *panchayat* to be the *upsarpanch*. She is a particularly dynamic and confident woman. Both Bimla herself and other women I spoke with in Nakhtarana attributed these characteristics to her religious and cultural status as a Jain woman, stating that Jains do not wear *ghunghat* and are educated.

Bimla was most of the time confident of her abilities as both a *ward panch* and *upsarpanch*. At panchayat meetings she would be, along with the *gram sevak*, organising things and chairing the meeting. The *sarpanch* of this panchayat is also a woman but never made any contribution to any of the meetings I attended. All other members of the *panchayat* and the local community appear to have the utmost respect for Bimla. She is a classic example of a woman whose education is a primary reason for her successful participation in the *gram panchayat*. She explained to me that when she was elected she went to the market and bought a book with all the rules and regulations of the *panchayat* in it so she would know what her own and other functionaries responsibilities are.

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I provide these examples to illustrate that certain women in certain circumstances have been able to take advantage of opportunities the reservation of seats for women has offered them. As well as individual circumstances which have enabled their more effective participation, what all these women hold in common is their relatively high levels of education.

6.5 The Relationship Between Gender Dynamics In The Family And Women's Participation In Politics

In some families I spoke to, the women perceived themselves as playing an active role doing what was required of them, whereas their husbands perceived that they were doing the work:

> 'I arranged two meetings a month and I always went and attended those meetings. There was a death in my family and even then I went to the meeting…Indra Avas Yojna housing was my responsibility. I took care of the money for pregnant women, we provided money during delivery. If there is some electricity connection it was my responsibility. If someone took their children out of one school and put them in another it was my responsibility. And if somebody gets a loan for a cow or a buffalo that was my responsibility. Because if there isn't a responsible person then the bank manager won't give the loan. There is a new sarpanch in our village but they still come to me more than him.' *Manju Devi a Sath woman who had been the sarpanch during the previous session. She is in her late forties or early fifties.*

Her husband referred all the time to himself as the *sarpanch* and when I queried him on this and pointed out that his wife was in fact the *sarpanch* he responded:

> 'She just gave her signature I did all the work.'

The truth is probably somewhere between the two. Indeed the relationship between women's level of political participation and the influence of male family members is far more nuanced. Some women are to all intents and purposes proxies for male family members or even other influential people in the village and some are acting quite independently, but many fall somewhere between the two. Mayaram and Pal (1996: 29) suggest alternative ways of looking at the relationship between women representatives and their male family members, within the constraints of patriarchal society. They argue that husbands' involvement in the affairs of the political body that their wife has a seat on can be viewed as a necessary support structure, particularly in this the early transitional phase of women's entry into local politics. Bryld (2001: 16) researching in

Karnataka again found support from husband's important but raises the issue of accountability, 'women are the ones entrusted by the voters and not their husbands or brothers, which does create a problem of accountability if the husband makes the decisions'

Contrary to these two studies and my work, Tremblay and Kumtakar (1998) researching in Madhya Pradesh found that nearly a quarter of women said their husbands and ninety percent said their in-laws tried to prevent them attending meetings. A more interesting point they raise relates to the temporary nature of the vast majority of women's entry into formal politics. They cite one of their informants as saying:

> 'after five years in this official position, she had to remain in the family and the household
> and that it was, therefore, in her own best interest to let the husband make the decisions...
> and thereby not disturb the harmony of the household.' (ibid: 464).

Nanivadekar (1998), likewise, found family members to be an essential form of support, however her research in Maharastra also reveals that equal numbers of male politicians have benefited due to their families' political connections.[11] It is important not to make the mistake of seeing familial support and or influence as something only relevant to women politicians in India.

The women I spoke with said they had not experienced opposition to their participation from either their husbands or the wider family. This is predictable since the decision that they would stand for election was a family decision: familial consensus had been achieved prior to them gaining their seats. Of significance, here, though is the small number of women who I had wanted to speak to at length but it had not been possible or it would have been unethical for me to do so. These women, it is likely, were experiencing resistance from their families.

I made it a condition of my data collection that I never interviewed or spoke at length to a woman when I first met with her. My reasoning for this is that I would not have wanted to cause difficulties for someone by speaking to them and then after the event either other family members had objections or they themselves worried about the consequences of speaking with me. Instead I wanted to give people the opportunity to

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[11] Richter (1990) discusses women's rise to political prominence in South Asia due to family connections and notes that men also use such channels.

really think about whether they wanted to speak to me and to consult with their family members.[12] The two most prominent of these examples are both women who did not live in areas where I was well known either. The first had been a member of the *zilla parishad* and lived in a village about an hour's bus journey from Bikaner town. On first meeting with her she was willing to talk, but when we visited her house on subsequent occasions her family members always told us she was out. It was quite obvious to both Monika and myself that she was in fact at home. The other example relates to a woman who villagers I met advised me to speak to. She is *ward panch* in her village but had recently moved to live with one of her sons in Bikaner town. She is an older woman and I had been told that she had been very outspoken at *panchayat* meetings. When I met her she was extremely angry about the behaviour of the *sarpanch* and the amount of money that was being sanctioned for works which never happened in the village. Her son, however, was obviously very anxious when he came and joined us. When I asked if I could return to speak to them again at length he refused. From the conversation we had it was apparent that he was concerned for his mother's welfare and was worried about the consequences of speaking to me. It was also apparent that this woman had been moved out of her village by her sons because she was being too outspoken against the *sarpanch's* husband and his cronies. I realise that these methodological decisions made in the field may have biased the research to some degree in that women who had the least autonomy in their families were those least likely to speak to me for a second time.

Since I was researching women's political participation I did not specifically question the relationship between family dynamics and men's political participation. Regardless of this, I was fortunate enough to be in one village while the election of a new *ward panch* was taking place and saw the huge amount of pride the newly elected *ward panch's* wife felt. I will tell this story in some detail as it raises important questions regarding methodology and interpretation.

Roshni *bai* is a woman in her mid thirties married with six sons and one daughter. She is one of the longest standing members of the village's *mahila sangathan*. I knew her husband had stood for election to *ward panch* previously but lost. Roshni and her family live behind the community centre where the *sangathan* meetings are held. The

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[12] It is not that I feel these women were not capable of making decisions for themselves but I was working in an environment where there is great emphasis placed on hospitality toward strangers and guests as such

community centre acts as a gathering point for people of the village, both men and women. Drought relief is distributed here, as well as vaccinations and various other social welfare measures. It is also the place where I stay in the village, with a Muslim family who live there, after having been made homeless. The family take it upon themselves to accommodate guests to the village and supply endless cups of tea and meals for visitors.

On this particular visit to the village Roshni's husband is standing for election to *ward panch* again. This is an unexpected election as it is a consequence of the previous *ward panch* having died. Only two candidates are standing. Roshni is delighted and excited to be telling me this news. The day before the election Roshni is out with her husband campaigning door to door around the village. I am informed that the whole of the sangathan will support Roshni. They tell me that it is Roshni who they support rather than giving me her husband's name or even saying Roshni's husband.

The truck belonging to the family I stay with is being used to take voters to Hansi, the neighbouring village where voting is taking place. As we climb in the back of the truck, along with the voters, there is a very positive and almost festive mood. Roshni herself is so proud and insists that I take photographs of her holding the ballot paper, with a picture of a basket of food and a tractor to represent the two candidates.

Roshni *bai* has a new outfit on which I comment on and she replies that this is because she is now going to be *ward panch*. Roshni does not refer to herself as the wife of the *ward panch* but the *ward panch* herself. It becomes apparent that all those who are around the community centre during the morning of the elections are talking about voting for Roshni *Bai* and Roshni *bai* becoming *ward panch* and not referring to her husband at all. I do acknowledge that this can in part be put down to the fact that many of those I am speaking to are *sangathan* members and people who know I am friendly with Roshni.

What this story illustrates so clearly is that politics is a family affair and it is not only when a woman is elected that the whole family is perceived as having entered politics. Of course the version of this story which I saw and heard was only partial. My story is one that looks predominantly from the perspective of Roshni, other *sangathan*

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people were always very welcoming when I first visited them.

members, the family who stay at the community centre and a few other people who are talking outside the community centre on election morning. I did not talk to Roshni's husband on that day, I did not visit the polling station and I am not seen to know Roshni's husband so well. All stories are only partial and with all events we only see, hear and report one part of the story. These events on election morning did make me ask myself how I would have interpreted these things had the roles been switched; if Roshni had indeed been the candidate and her husband the one everyone was referring to as the candidate. It made me question further my understanding of the roles that women's husbands or fathers-in-law play in their wives' or daughters-in-laws' political participation. As was expected Roshni's husband did indeed win the election.

6.6 Thoughts, Feelings And Perceptions Around Women's Political Participation

Few of those I spoke with did anything drastic during their sessions but were proud to simply have their seats and attend meetings. Pride is expressed in relation to two aspects of participation. First, pride due to the status that comes with holding such a position and second, pride in what women feel they have achieved. The first reason is often heightened because for many women they are the first person in either their *pihar* or *sasural* family or even their immediate community to hold a political seat. Women demonstrated the pride they felt by being keen to tell me which ward they represented and what their responsibilities were. The second reason for feeling pride was demonstrated by telling me what they had done during their session or what was not happening now which did happen when they had been on the *panchayat*. On one occasion a woman *ward panch* who had held the seat at that time for only a number of months showed me the school that was being built in her community's area. Despite the fact that it is likely this school was sanctioned during the previous session she felt she could lay claim to the achievement simply by virtue of being the current *ward panch*. Her husband and her were also overseeing the building work. She insisted that I take a photograph of her standing on the first couple of foot of bricks, which had been laid.

However, feelings of pride can be confusing because they may be held alongside feelings of embarrassment or shame due to breaking with gendered expectations, as this quote demonstrates:

> 'They changed my name after I became *ward panch*, they started calling being me *netaji,
> netaji,* [leader]. So they changed my name.... (It) feels good. My daughter told me
> 'everybody is calling you *netaji'*, but I feel ashamed.' *Middle aged ward panch*

This sense of pride in both belonging to something important and in actions undertaken
is common among members of the village women's *sangathans* also, as these two
quotes from long standing older members illustrate:

> 'I only worked for my village, in my own capacity I worked. I was the representative of
> my village, I was very strong and if the villagers used to say [anything] then I used to face
> them.'

> 'The whole village has changed. Like we speak only in terms of justice, and we never tell
> say anything dishonest or tell lies. So the people believe in us.... We always teach other
> women we give good advice and good teaching to them.'

A sense of pride in one's actions, position, sense of belonging or achievement is an
indicator of an increase in self-confidence. An increase in self-confidence has been
recognised as a key constituent in the process of individual empowerment. Datta's
(1998: 130) study of all women panchayats in Maharastra also identifies respect and
social recognition as important facets of empowerment that were achieved by the
women members she spoke to.

Pride is similarly something felt by the families of the women *sangathan* and *panchayat*
members. Again this could either simply be related to the position that the women held,
or in regards to actual things that had been achieved:

> 'Women generally do not have courage like these old women did, who did that hard work.'
> *A son talking about his mother's involvement in the sangathan.*

> 'Before I was *Sarpanch* they didn't take my advice. In my *pihar* before being *sarpanch*
> nobody valued me, but now they come here. My brother and my nephews come here and
> they take my advice.' *Previous session older woman sarpanch*

> 'In the market place if somebody comes to them and says your mother is doing well in the
> panchayat *samiti* meeting or your mother spoke well about that, they feel proud.' *A
> husband explaining to me the way in which his sons feel about their mother's political
> position.*

Along with pride fear and despondency are the foremost emotions women express when
discussing their political participation. Fear is discussed in Chapter Four and
despondency is discussed in Chapter Seven.

Despite the widespread negative views held about politics in general and the functioning of the *Panchayati Raj* institutions the vast majority of people, whether political representatives, village residents or NGO workers, express the opinion that women should and could hold political office. Mayaram, (2000: 44) found the same in her research in Rajasthan. Whether a quota system was the best way or not to achieve this was not readily discussed. This positive response to women entering formal politics is supported by the fact that nearly all of those I questioned said they would be happy for a woman member of their family to have a seat on a *panchayat*. This was the same in regard to participation in the *sangathans*, at least among the caste and economic groups that the women involved come from.

It could of course be argued that the reason for so many positive responses being received, within such a patriarchal context, is because people assume these are the correct responses to give or at least the correct response to give to an educated female outsider. However, since people were prepared to disagree with me on other issues and told me on many occasions how things are different for them I do not believe that this would explain the levels of positive responses expressed to me regarding women's entry in politics. However, men's responses to women's participation in the *panchayat* could be satirical, for example a husband of a woman sarpanch made me tea one day and said he was doing this because his wife is now a politician. On other occasions men would say 'men will have to make the *roti* if women are in politics'.

Despite the general positive attitudes towards women's entry into local politics knowledge of the quota system is surprisingly scant among *panchayat* representatives and village residents. For instance, it is generally known how many women have seats on their village *panchayat* but not that a third of seats across all the *Panchayat Institutions* are reserved for women. Nevertheless, everyone I spoke to is aware that there was some kind of quota system in operation.

The vast majority of village residents expressed an understanding of why the reservation for women in the *panchayat* institutions had been brought in. This understanding was either expressed in an abstract fashion with people saying things such as 'it is to raise women up' or 'so that women get a chance' or 'so that women have equal rights' or 'women will lose their hesitation'. As explored in Chapter Five

people also talk about more specific things, such as 'so women can learn to speak' or 'women will get knowledge'.

It was at times difficult to distinguish between whether people were telling me why they thought the reservation had been brought in and what they thought the actual effects have been so far or what they might be in the future. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw the conclusion that while the idea of women's participation and the aims and objectives accorded to it are accepted and supported at an abstract level, people are more pessimistic when looking at the everyday repercussions and the practical implications. Some feel the effect would be negligible regarding both a change in women's status or on the functioning of the *panchayat* bodies. People who feel women are not participating and their husbands are doing all the work are most likely to hold this opinion as they believe that in reality nothing has actually changed.

Some went further stating that having women in the *panchayat* institutions will have a negative effect on the development of the village:

> 'I think there should be less seats for women, if there are women involved in the panchayat they don't do anything.' *Woman ward panch*

> 'It is wrong. It has stopped the development of the village. Like a certain *sarpanch* is of OBC (other backward caste) and she does not know how to read and write, she is uneducated she can not do anything and her husband is also uneducated. They don't know anything, they can't understand anything, so what can they do, they can't do any work. Last time there was a *pradham* and he was also uneducated so you can imagine their administration. So what can such people do?' *Zilla Parishad member*

This last quote is less concerned with women per se than anyone who does not have the capabilities to participate effectively.

Women's presence is viewed by some as having a positive effect on the way in which *panchayat* business is conducted. This included the opinion that women's presence at the meetings would make men behave better, that there would be less shouting and arguing. However, a woman who had had a seat on the *zilla parishad* during the previous session explained women's better behaviour in terms of them having less investment or involvement in the outcome of *panchayat* meetings' deliberations, rather than any propensity to conduct themselves in a more refined manner.

Those who are more sympathetic to women representatives would say that women were learning and that slowly change would come about. I was also told by both villagers and NGO workers that the reservation would encourage people to send their daughters to school so that they would be equipped to work in the panchayats themselves. Pai (2002:137-8) also found this change in attitude among the women she spoke to in Uttar Pradesh she argues that:

'That the provisions of reservations had not led to women participating in decision making in political bodies. However, standing for elections and becoming *pradhanis* has made a difference in the lives of these women. It has made them realize that it is their illiteracy, which prevents them from playing a more active and responsible role in the affairs of the *panchayat*. As a result of this perception, they pointed out that all girls below 15 years are now attending the village school.'

Interestingly people in the villages in which the *sangathans* operated had far vaguer views on why the *sangathans* had been created for women specifically. Where they did have an opinion it would most usually be that the *sangathans* had been formed to provide work for women. In discussing not only the rationale for and formation of the *sangathans* but also their activities, caste was a far more important factor in influencing people's knowledge and answers than it was when discussing women's *participation* in the *panchayats*. Membership of the *sangathans* was restricted to certain caste and economic groups. Those from these groups who had had some involvement with either the *sangathan* or the NGO are naturally more knowledgeable about the activities of the Sangathan.

It is uncommon to hear negative attitudes expressed towards the activities of women members of the *sangathans*. I do recognise again how these responses may have been influenced by people's awareness that I was living or mixing with mainly women who were members of the *sangathans* and as such would not have wanted to offend me by being negative, towards these women. I did however hear some negative opinions coming from higher caste people in the village, who perhaps begrudged the support that the women received from the URMUL Trust. At times this would be directed towards

what the women actually did as a group or it would be in the form of derogatory comments directed explicitly at the women themselves.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on three dynamics of women's participation in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions: the relationship between women's participation and their families political role; institutional, social and personal factors which facilitate and hinder a woman's effective participation and how women's participation is perceived by both themselves and the wider community.

By tracing women's participation in local politics from the decision to stand for election it is clear that politics is something conducted by the family and not solely the individual who holds the seat. While family members may in some cases be doing all the political work for the women in other examples they are an invaluable source of support. The level of involvement of other family members varies greatly from woman to woman. While levels of women's effective participation are extremely low, even the smallest amount of political activity in the context of Northwest Rajasthan, such as simply attending a meeting, is highly significant and may have been a huge personal struggle for a particular woman. It is also clear that politics is a family affair not only when women are the official holders of positions but also when men are. Research has also shown that men benefit from their familial connections in regard to their political participation as much as women do.

Many different factors affect a woman's ability to effectively participate in politics, be this her educational standard, her status in the family, her personal characteristics, the nature of the *panchayat* body she has a seat on or how much outside support she receives, particularly from civil society organisations. No one attribute or circumstance can be identified as necessarily making a significant difference, however I contend that education is fundamental for women to participate independently and be able to make informed decisions about how they conduct the functions of their position. Illiterate women are extremely vulnerable to exploitation within the administration of the *Panchayati Raj* system and totally dependent on assistance from literate family members or *panchayat* functionaries.

Finally the chapter considered the attitudes of local people from different social and economic backgrounds to women's participation in local politics. It is clear that rural communities are aware of the ideas of women's rights and gender equality along with the emphasis 'outsiders' are putting on making changes to women's lives. It is also possible to say that most people, at least in an abstract fashion, are in support of women entering politics and positive changes in women's lives.

CHAPTER SEVEN
FINDING POWER: DEPENDENCY, DESPONDENCY AND SOLIDARITY

'The women got together and our photographs were taken and they were taken to different
countries and everyone earned from those photographs, but we were not given anything.'
Sangathan Member.

7.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with power dynamics among the various actors involved with
the village level women's *sangathans,* and to a lesser extent *Panchayati Raj* institutions.
The Chapter focuses on two dominant themes: dependency and despondency. Members
of the *sangathans* frequently communicated feelings of both dependency and
despondency to me. Likewise, the powerlessness and disappointment many women felt
in relation to their roles on the *panchayats* was evident.

As the quote at the start of this chapter points to, power relations in operation between
NGOs and recipient actors are not only constructed within local or national boundaries
but are simultaneously influenced by global relationships. These dynamics are in part,
then, constructed, re-constructed and maintained through the exigencies of donor
organisations,[1] who in turn are influenced by dominant discourses on both development
and gender. This theme is briefly explored in the first section of this chapter in order to
present the global context in which village women and NGO field-workers negotiate
their roles and relationships.

In the second section of this chapter the ways in which power is commonly understood
to operate, by those who informed my research, is presented and discussed. In doing so
it examines pictures of power: the stories people tell to present the times and places in
which they felt powerful and the times and places when they felt their power was being
usurped.

The third section of the chapter considers power dynamics between the organisation
which initiated the formation of the *sangathans* and the women members of the
sangathans themselves. It argues that however participatory and inclusive techniques

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[1] It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delineate between the various donor institutions. As such I use
the term 'donor' generically to include all those providing funding to NGOs based in South Asia. This
includes NGOs based in first world countries, bilateral donors and international donors.

for organising groups of people may be, parent organisations while supplying funding and expertise ultimately retain a larger share of power in determining the directions and decisions of the group. This section also considers what women *sangathan* members feel they were entitled to as a consequence of their participation in the *sangathan.* Many of the women I spoke with see themselves as both working for the NGO and as an essential element in the sustainability of the organisation itself. This conflicts with the NGOs perception of these women as recipients of both personal and community development assistance and support and as an efficient channel through which to direct this to the rest of the village.

The fourth section of this chapter looks at women's relationships with the machinery of the state and how they have sought to influence it. It shows how women use, and are used due to, their status as women. The dynamic between the power that women may feel they have in the public realm and that which they feel they have in the domestic realm is also explored.

The final section discusses the nature of and construction of leadership and solidarity among the women members of *sangathans* and *panchayats.* It acknowledges the importance of the power women felt they could exert through their cohesion and identity as a group. At the same time it recognises that women are deeply divided by structural factors such as age, position in the family, real and fictive kin relationships in the village, class and caste divisions as well as family and personal conflicts and individual and group relationships with the organising body. I argue, therefore, that in both analysing women's political behaviour and initiating political behaviour in women, as a group, it is as essential to take into consideration the facets of their lives which divide them or may even pit them against each other, as those which they hold in common.

NGO workers and others aiming to achieve gender equity often talk about identifying leadership potential in individual women and creating leaders among groups of women. I examine the contradictions entailed in creating leaders in groups of people within which solidarity is assumed to exist and is seen to be an essential tool for their success. I argue that, in the case of the *mahila sangathans* I studied the creation of leaders has been synonymous with the creation or at least the enhancement of inequitable relationships of power among members of such groups.

7.2 Power Dynamics: NGOs, Donors And Their Recipients

'The Trust go begging to foreigners'. *Older sangathan member*

As the quote above and the one at the beginning of this chapter illustrate, village women members of the *sangathans* have a perspective beyond that of their direct relationship with URMUL Trust. This understanding incorporates ideas about international power relations. Although my fieldwork did not directly investigate the relationship between URMUL Trust and its donors, the impact of these NGO and donor dynamics are evident and significant in structuring how women *sangathan* members perceive the relationship between themselves and the NGO and its field-workers. While I only refer in a limited manner directly to URMUL Trust's specific relationship to its donors, it is necessary, and relevant, to set URMUL Trust and the communities it works with in a wider national and global context of NGO, state and donor relations.

NGOs have greatly increased in number, both globally as well as in India, over the last two decades, they have also grown in size making them significant players in social welfare. This growth has corresponded with an increasing ideological dominance of neo-liberal ideas which encourage the expansion of the private sector, civil society and public-private partnerships (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 3; Igoe, 2003: 864). Likewise, their visibility has greatly increased and their impact is generally seen as positive in the public imagination in most, if not all, places. Small scale projects organised by NGOs are held up as examples of successful development. NGOs have become increasingly popular with governments and aid agencies, being seen as the best channel for the delivery of social welfare and deliberately recruited to carry out government programmes (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 5). URMUL Trust, for example, is delivering the government of India's RCH (Reproductive and Child Health) programme in their area. One management level NGO worker acknowledged the difficulties having such close ties to governmental actors:

> 'But in URMUL Trust there is a big problem, government bodies, the Collector, medical
> and health officers and the MD of Urmul Dairy and the MD RCDF Jaipur and the Principle
> of the Medical college Bikaner are the chair and the trustees of Urmul Trust. So when we
> worked for rural people's advocacy or some agitation against them [these government
> servants], it is not easy. There was always pressure from behind, when we did this type of
> activity.... Not only was the secretary of Urmul Trust pressurised but also the workers who
> took women to the collector to raise certain issues and those who organised *dharnas* [sit-
> ins] and rallies they also faced the same problems. Pressure from the authorities.'

The way in which these close ties can compromise women's rights and entitlements, in particular, is clearly illustrated in this example told to me by a management level NGO worker:

> 'Some women from Ramtek and Kajanpur villages they asked the Collector, "why don't you start some work [drought relief work] in our area?". And the Collector was sitting in our campus and he says OK I will sanction works but will you please arrange fifty family planning[2] cases [laughter] a fare condition in fact.... They did organise a separate camp for them [sterilisation camp] and then the work was sanctioned and so it was that the women had come forward and worked and motivated their family.'

This story shows how rather than women simply being able to demand access to drought relief works they have to make sure that the Collector gets what he needs first. The women essentially, in this example, have had to hand over their bodies to the state in order that officials can meet their required 'family planning' targets. In return the Collector will sanction drought relief works in their villages.

Hulme and Edwards (eds.) (1997) raise concerns about this change in local NGOs' relationships with national states and Northern donors. They argue that NGOs having to compete for funding increases the likelihood that they become mere implementers of donor policies and as such ask:

> 'Are NGOs being valued because of the different questions they ask and approaches they adopt? Or are they valued because they now have the social grace not to persist with awkward questions and organisation capacity to divert the poor and disadvantaged from more radical ideas about how to overcome poverty?' (ibid: 3)

Certainly the two women's *sangathans* I was researching had become less radical, with an increasing focus on welfare delivery and less on access to land rights or public services.

Townsend and Townsend (2004) draw attention to how, what they call, the 'new managerialism' of audit culture, self-legitimation and self-representation, and governability has placed more emphasis on procedural efficiency and cost cutting of delivery rather than actual difference made. This encourages a culture within local NGOs whereby 'upward accountability' overrides 'downward accountability' to beneficiaries (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 8).

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[2] Family planning in this context is a euphemism for sterilisation operations.

These changes were apparent in the context of my research. While women members of the *sangathans* complained that unlike the originators of the NGO the new management did not visit them or answer their calls for assistance, the new management were spending more and more of their time engaging with international donor NGOs and national government representatives.

Dominant development discourses and fashions in development, even though they may have to varying degrees originated in poor communities, are now becoming 'top down' policy recommendations given to local NGOs in Africa and Asia by donor agencies. They may not be appropriate but NGOs have to pay lip service to them in order to secure funding. During informal conversations with NGO workers they drew attention to the essential use of certain buzz-words, such as 'women's empowerment' and 'participation', in project proposals. Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley (2002: 830) describe international or donor NGOs as instrumental in the transmission of these fashions:

> '[D]espite the extraordinary diversity of the NGDO [Non-governmental Development Organisations] scene both within countries and around the globe, NGDOs are responsible for taking buzz-words to all corners of the globe, and bring back to the privileged of the earth images of people, of needs, of realities that attract more funding and legitimisation to donors and the NGDOs.'

This quote also highlights the two way nature of this relationship referred to in the earlier quotes made by *sangathan* members. They were aware how important the NGO's representation of them to 'outsiders' was in sustaining the NGO itself. NGOs have to present their recipients in a particular light in order that they secure funding. Or as Igoe (2003:881)states:

> 'Communities become commodities of an international NGO industry.'

7.3 Illustrating Power: Violence And Authority

When talking with women *sangathan* and *panchayat* members, their families and other members of village communities, power was most usually presented as existing in two forms. First, physical violence, which women talked about both being the victims of and living under the threat of and as being perpetrators or potential perpetrators of. This conceptualisation of power falls in to the category of what is understood as 'power over'. That is the power used to control the actions or opinions of others, as discussed

in detail in Chapter Two. The second way in which power is understood is the power contained and achieved by an individual or family due to the level of respect they receive from others. This was illustrated by those I spoke with using examples of when they were called on to solve disputes or examples of their advice being sought. This type of power is associated with notions of 'power to', which is both decision making power as well as creative and enabling, as again is discussed in Chapter Two.

At times stories of violence are relayed as true events. At other times violence is used metaphorically by women in order to either exemplify the power they feel they have or are being deprived of. I often heard, individual women's accounts of violence inflicted upon them by their husbands and other members of their marital family, but alongside these individual accounts is a more generalised discourse in which these women talk about domestic violence being used as a means to suppress women as a group. For example a group of elderly women *sangathan* members told me that they are all controlled by their husbands. I asked them how such women who appeared to be so strong to me could be controlled and they all started to hit themselves, to communicate how they are controlled. A significant proportion of this group of women are actually widows living with sons and daughter-in-laws and from the interactions I had with their families and the obvious honesty they demonstrated in the stories they told to me, they did not seem to be the victims of violence from family members at this point in their lives, even if they may have been in the past. Accepting this, male violence was, therefore, being used to demonstrate a more generalised way in which women as a group are controlled. These women were not only able to tell me of their experiences of violence but also provide an analysis of the wider consequences of such violence on their lives.

When I questioned women members of *sangathans* as to why other women had not become involved, in the end, they would almost always tell me it was because their husbands would beat them:

> 'They were afraid that is why they didn't come...Their husbands would beat them.' *Older sangathan member*

> 'All the family members told us that they [the NGO people] will make fools of us and that they will sell us, these types of things.... We didn't say anything because if we oppose them or we try to explain things then they would beat us so we just didn't do anything.... Both ways they threaten us and they beat us.' *sangathan member in her mid thirties*

Along with this fear of violence is an acceptance of violence in women's lives. A commonly heard expression is 'women eat beatings', implying that women are constantly beaten and have to accept this as part of their everyday lives.

Women's actual experience of violence as well as living under a threat of violence is recognised by many women I spoke with as a key means to maintain their subordinate position and the continuation of disempowering gender relations. However, the language of violence was also used to illustrate situations in which they felt they were powerful:

> 'We were all united and so we went to the demonstration and we broke all the things in the court, using stones. We broke the mirror, the glass in the windows and in the cupboards and we broke all the doors. They had a rope barrier but we broke through that. We hit the policemen with stones and they bled, and, maybe the biggest officer of the policemen or a big official, he ran away from there and he hid in the court and we were trying to catch him and we said come or we will kill you.' *Older sangathan member*

> 'So I went to the BDO [block development officer] and I asked him, "Where are our forms?" but he was trying to avoid us. I lost my temper and I told him, "I'll put chilli powder in your eyes, we are the ladies and we will beat you, come out. And we will break your car and we'll destroy your office". And after that camp we went to Bikaner, to the Collector's house, and I started shouting and I showed this newspaper to him and I said, "Where is the sanction, where is the sanction?" And I kicked the chairs and the stools in his office. Then the Collector approved things.' *Middle-aged Rajput previous session woman ward panch*

Other stories about violence perpetrated or threatened by the women included a tale of putting marijuana in the *Tehsil Dar's* tea in order to get him to comply with the demands of the *sangathan* and *sangathan* members describing using farming tools as weapons to defend the land they were cultivating.

The other dominant picture of power offered is people presenting themselves as judgement makers and dispute mediators. These types of stories were told by a variety of informants. Men from families which are either politically established or well trusted, as categorised in Chapter Six, tell stories of how they are called upon to resolve problems in the village or disputes between different individuals.

> 'Like if there is some slight dispute, like in the market there can be one between anyone so no one knows who is telling the truth and who is not. So they call me. Like on breaking the water turn, you know the canal water [for irrigation] is given one by one, in turns. So

like two people's farms are near to each other. One steals water from the other by diverting it into his fields... to different places I am called, like Kalu and Jaitpur. When they don't want to go to the police or whatever, they call me because we are respected.' *Muslim husband of a previous session ward panch*

This explanation, illustrates how respect from the community gives people the authority to make decisions concerning a range of community issues, including access to resources. It is more common to hear men present themselves in this way, reflecting the greater status they generally hold in the public realm. When women present themselves in this manner it is indicative of their self-perception of their status in the village or in a particular situation; how much respect, which gives authority and power, they feel they have achieved.

It is possible to see this type of respect and hence women's power having risen as a consequence of their positions in the *sangathans*:

'There is some change, like if there is any dispute or anything in the village then they say call "so and so" and we are called there and then if URMUL trust has any meeting or any work then they always call us. If there is a dispute between anybody then they call us because we always speak. We always do justice.... When two are fighting we try to find out who is the guilty one and who is not guilty.' *Older sangathan member*

Other women asserted that they were well respected before becoming part of the village *sangathan* and cited this as the reason why they were invited to join.

'The *sangathan* was made afterwards, but also before they listened to me. The villagers had good relations with me and they listened to me.' *Older sangathan member*

These pictures of power, in which power is obtained through respect coming from the community, can be understood as power through authority. Although the concept of authority is most usually used to discuss forms of formal governance, the idea of authority as 'the right to act and make laws' (Skalnik; 1999: 163), I argue it can also be used to describe and understand situations whereby individuals or groups are called upon to solve disputes through judgement and essentially make decisions based on those judgements. This type of authority can then be described as a form of 'sporadic informal governance'. It is based on people being listened to and their judgements being taken seriously. The theme of people's voices being listened to and considered is also raised in the following section as it considers the power relations between women *sangathan* members and the NGO as an institution.

7.4 Finding Power: NGOs And Women *Sangathan* Members

The relationship between the NGO as an institution and the *mahila sangathans* is a complex one made up of dynamics of mutual dependency and inequities of power. On the one hand, as the quote at the beginning of the chapter points to, the existence of 'poor rural women', who 'need empowering' and who are able and willing to participate, is integral to the sustainability of the NGO itself. On another level the recognised commitment and reliability of these groups of women is a crucial part of the administering of the development assistance and activities of the NGO in the villages where it works.

On the other hand is the dependency the women *sangathan* members feel towards the NGO which manifests itself in different forms. The most obvious is the way in which the *sangathan* members look to the NGO, an outside force for leadership. This is most commonly seen in the form of reliance on the NGO to initiate activities and provide continuing support for those activities, as is illustrated by the following quotes:

> 'Once we destroyed the alcohol shop, but now it has started again.... Dairy workers told us
> to destroy the shop.... The bottles and the other things we broke and we drained the
> alcohol and we destroyed all the things.... Dairy workers gave us this duty, so it is our duty
> to do this.... Alcohol destroys the man, spoils the man... It has started again.... When the
> *malik* [boss] or the *sahb* tells us, gives us the duty, we will again destroy everything.... If
> they order us then we do.' *Older sangathan member.*

This dependency is an outcome of the type of support and the impacts the NGO has had on the lives of these women. However, it also has to be understood in terms of the limited amount of social power the *sangathan* members have themselves. Being economically poor, low caste and illiterate, naturally leads to feelings of vulnerability and a real and/or perceived need to have a person or people with more social influence giving support, as is expressed in these quotes:

> 'Because there is no strong man for us we feel threatened and we don't want to do
> anything. If we fight for our rights and suppose someone beats me or maybe I beat
> someone. There is no strong person from my side. If we go further with our complaints
> and no one listens to us, what then?' *Older sangathan member*

> 'What can the *sangathan* do? When we fought we had the support of *sahb*. Now we don't
> have any support.... We don't have any money. At that time *sahb* used to give us money.
> Then he used to give us money. Now we don't get any money so what shall we do by
> sitting there?... We tried to stop them [the villagers who chop down the trees on the land]
> but we can't. If people like you are behind us then they will be afraid. We would go and

stop them but we don't get any support.... What can we do by ourselves? They'll not listen to us.... If we get the support of people like you then we'll fight for that land and do anything for it. If you tell me then we'll go to do that.... If you are not powerful then it is OK. If you don't have power then what do we have? If we have you to go before us then we can follow.' *Older sangathan member*

'We can't go out without them because we don't have knowledge, without the *trust* we don't know anyone.' *Older sangathan member.*

Despite the dependency *sangathan members* feel towards the NGO for support in political activities, the women have themselves been the initiating force for several actions. Indeed more dominant and proud members of the *sangathans* describe themselves as being the instigators of particular actions. The quote below relates to an activity undertaken by one village *sangathan* to ensure that teachers came and actually taught at the village school[3]. Particular women from this *sangathan* presented different versions of events which portrayed themselves as more influential or important in the activities undertaken. This is part of Meena *bai*'s story:

'Because there was no school for studying we demanded a school and we built a school and after that we demanded a teacher and when the teacher was working in the school we sent our children to study.... So we ten women we stopped our girls from working in the household and we stopped our boys from feeding the goats in the fodder area. But they were not teaching our children properly and we had a problem. They would not teach our children properly, so we locked the school. We closed the school for three months.... We sat and planned everything, 'what will we do?' and 'what have we done?', this type of thing.... We went to Sanjay Ghose [founder of URMUL Trust] and told him, 'the teachers do not teach our children properly, so please take us to the *tehsil* [block political and administrative headquarters]'. We went to the *tehsil* and we said why do you spoil our children? All the things, all the works we did were under the supervisions of Sanjay Ghose.... We planned and Sanjay Ghose gave us support.... [the idea] was the women's.'

Dependency is also exhibited in the form of simply asking for material assistance. The *sangathan* members' precarious economic situation in itself makes the seeking of support from outsiders an important survival strategy.

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[3] Teachers simply not turning up to teach or only coming sporadically to schools in the villages is major problem in the area of my fieldwork. For example, Monika and I spent some time talking to a group of children while we were waiting for a *panchayat* meeting to begin. One particularly insightful boy of about ten years old told us how the children in his village cannot get an education because the teachers rarely come. He explained how some of the boys go to a larger school in a village closer to the nearest town but for the girls there he told us there is nothing.

'We don't even get food to eat so how can we fight with those people, we only fold our hands before the Trust, before the women of the Trust and tell them you do something for us.' *Older sangathan member*

As this quote shows dependency often arises out of feelings of despondency. This group of women often felt that they themselves were not capable of changing their own lives: change could only come though the actions of outsiders. These feelings of despondency are rooted in feelings of powerlessness. Feelings of powerlessness arising out of a lack of perceptible or real options, often compounded by everyday living situations which involve a constant struggle for family survival.

Although many of the political actions the *sangathans* had been involved in had been successful in their own right none had been sustainable. Despite the NGO's aim to make the *sangathans* self-sustaining this had not been achieved in the case of the two *sangathans* I was studying. This was coupled with a situation whereby for various reasons the NGO was unable to maintain the high levels of support it had originally provided. This change in the amount of support and assistance given, both material and social, as well as a change in the general interaction between the women and the NGO workers has left the women feeling disappointed, exploited and at times very angry.

'They have forgotten that when they put the first stone of the foundation of the centre, there were lots of fights and disputes, and the people who were in opposition to them at that time, now they are getting the benefits. But we who supported them we don't get anything.' *Older sangathan member*

'When we used to go to Urmul Trust they used to give us lots of things food, tea and water, they gave all the facilities to us and now when we go there – if we go there directly they say give your coupons, the food coupon…. We run from one room to another room to another room to try and get tea. He says he will give you and then he says he will give you…. If the Trust respected us then they would come here to show us the video and the plays, so that our hearts would expand towards them and we would go to the Trust…. We are eight women who have been in the *sangathan* for the past fifteen years. If any work happens in Ramtek nobody even asks us to manage it, or if we want to do it, or if we want to give it to others.' *Older sangathan member.*

Women who had been involved in the *sangathans* for longer periods frequently described themselves as having worked for the NGO and as now not receiving any reward for the work they had done. Women would speak about having worked for the *sangathan* for years:

> 'We ran for the *sangathan* for between thirteen and fifteen years but we didn't have any benefit because we didn't have pay, a salary or any kind of money. You do as a service for one time or a second time but if you don't get any help or any money, how can you continue your work. Like Monika as an example if you didn't pay her she wouldn't keep coming, Monika's children would be starving with hunger. The same is true in my house'.
> *Older sangathan member.*

The women and their families have been given support and assistance by the Trust throughout the years, however, they <u>have</u> worked for the Trust in many ways, as well. For instance the woman speaking in the quote above had played a significant role in easing the Trusts access to her village, encouraging other women to join the *sangathan* and giving regular updates on the demography of the village to NGO fieldworkers. The women provided knowledge and information to the NGO workers and they were often objects of positive publicity for the NGO.

A further example of the way in which the women of the *sangathan* feel exploited, in relation to the positive publicity that they provide for the trust, is the story of a documentary film, *Sona Mata*. The film focuses on the struggles of one *sangathan* around land-rights issues. It in fact focuses predominantly on one particular woman member of the *sangathan*. The film had been very successful and won a documentary film award. The NGO themselves are very proud of the film. However, the women expressed a contrary view of what the film meant to them:

> 'When *Sona Mata,* the film was made, we didn't know anything about it. The people came here with video cameras and they got gold thali [plates] and glasses and many rupees but what have we got - nothing.... They made films and they used to tell me to go on the sand dunes. I used to go and come back and go and come back. We were made to climb trees also.... They only came once in order to make the picture and they don't come back.... Everyone saw the film, the film came here. Everyone saw the film and the villagers felt sad and the husbands felt sad that the women did such things. We were made to climb trees, wouldn't the husbands feel bad? We earned for them and we provided them with food. Who are they to make films about us? And for eight days we were running here and there and they earned money from that.' *Sangathan member*

Many of the women's complaints were expressed directly in regard to the lack of material rewards. However, what seemed to be upsetting them more was that they felt they were no longer receiving the same levels of respect from the NGO. The respect they had received in the early days when their participation was essential for the NGO

to establish itself in their villages, they feel is diminishing. A striking example and also a situation which was perhaps the catalyst for many of the feelings of disappointment in one village, was the decision as to who would receive housing assistance after sudden rains had destroyed a large number of homes in the village. This dismal situation which also occurred during a three year drought period undoubtedly contributed to the general feeling of despondency I found among many of those I spoke with during this period.[4]

It is possible to see through the different accounts provided by *sangathan* members and that of the village field-worker, in regard to the distribution of housing provision, that different people tell different stories about the same event. Both accounts of what happened in the meeting to decide who would get housing provision are probably true versions of events but seen from different perspectives. The account provided by the women was given to me during a focus group discussion and that by the fieldworker during an in-depth interview:

Sangathan member:	We made the *sangathan* strong but they gave the houses to the people who they wanted to give them to.
Focus group facilitator :	When they organised the meeting about distributing the houses were you there? What happened in the meeting?
Sangathan member:	They didn't ask us.
Sangathan member:	We were there.
Sangathan member:	They didn't ask us.
Sangathan member:	We went there but they didn't ask us. We were just sitting outside. We have been here for 15 or 16 years. and our shoes are tattered and torn, and they didn't give us houses or even ask us when they distributed them to others they didn't show us any respect. So we felt sorrow for ourselves about that.

Excerpt from a focus group meeting

| *Interviewer:* | Can you tell me how the decision was made as to who would get the houses in the village? |

[4] Perhaps if I had been researching during a time of greater food and economic security I would have been provided with a different picture of events. However, drought is a regular feature of life in this part of Rajasthan and as such the way people feel at these times can not be seen as out of the ordinary.

NGO worker:	Our *sangathan* took that decision.
Interviewer:	Which *sangathan* decided the women's or the men's or both?
NGO worker:	A mixture of both. We made a committee.
Interviewer:	When you say we took the decision you mean Urmul Trust or the *sangathan* took the decision?
NGO worker:	*sangathan sangathan*

excerpt from an interview with a male NGO worker

The long term members of the *sangathan* are upset about the change in treatment that they are receiving from the NGO. The women did not seem to be aware of the NGO's long term plans for the *sangathans*. If exit strategies had existed the women had not been informed about them or had not fully understood or internalised them. Some of the changes that had occurred within the organisation and operations of the Trust had been impossible to predict, such as the disappearance and presumed death of the founder of the NGO. The women's expectations were raised in order to get them involved and then as the levels and types of support changed they feel let down. As an explanation to this situation one NGO worker stated that:

'We haven't left them, we are still there. In the beginning we gave them the fare to give them company and food we provided that our fieldworker went with them but now they have started they can go to Bikaner by themselves. They spend their own money.... To solve their problems we started the *sangathan*, so in the beginning very few women came, slowly, slowly lots of women came. We have been trying to participate in their problems. We give them lots of training and lots of activities are going on there and the fieldworkers live there, we lived in the field. So after some time we had a meeting and told them how long we were going to be with them. But they did not know that after ten years we will leave them' *Woman NGO worker*

The women told me that they had raised their complaints with the NGO workers and they asked me to do so on their behalf. Despite this in most of the interactions I saw they did not challenge the workers to their faces. Instead they more often succumbed to the demands of the NGO. One of the most poignant examples of this happened at the very beginning of my research. I had naively accepted a lift on my first visit to a

particular village in one of the NGO's jeeps, with two of its most senior workers. They took me straight to the home of perhaps the most dominant and active of the *sangathan* members, Rohini *bai*. She welcomed me warmly, putting her hands on my head and saying she had been waiting for me. I was then told by the NGO workers that I could interview her. In front of them she gave me a very passionate and detailed interview regarding her participation in the *sangathan*, while we sat and drank tea under the tree outside her home.

I felt uncomfortable interviewing in this situation but to have not taken the interview then may have offended the NGO people who had been helpful to me. Rohini *bai* during successive visits, demonstrated her power to me. She refused to speak to me or see me again for sometime until I re-established an independent relationship with her. From successive conversations I had with Rohini it was clear that she would probably not have agreed to be interviewed by me at all on a first visit if it had not been requested by the NGO workers. She would have withheld until she felt she could trust me, but I assume she did not feel able to say no in front of the NGO workers. She would tell me I was just the same as the people who had made the film. She told me that they came and took her story and made money from that but she did not get anything.

It seems appropriate to insert a further story of my first interaction with the women of this *sangathan* at this stage, before continuing to discuss their relationship with the NGO. On the same day after talking to Rohini *bai* I went to attend a *sangathan* meeting to discuss the distribution of work for food and wages during the drought. After the meeting the NGO workers left and the women all took me for a walk around the village. At some point we split into two groups, with one woman, Bina *bai*, taking me to her house and to the houses of two *jat* families she is friendly with. Upon returning to the community centre all the other women verbally attacked Bina *bai* in a extremely vicious manner because she had taken me away by herself when they all wanted to look after me. My understanding and interpretation of this event is that because I had arrived in a jeep with NGO workers it was assumed that I must be there to give in some way and if it was Bina who hosted me alone the other women may miss out on something or they may have feared that Bina would tell negative stories about them. There existed quite a bit of animosity between Bina and some of the other women anyway.

After these events it took some time to build up the women's trust in me and convince them that I did not have any formal links with the NGO. From here it was possible to slowly build personal relationships with these women and other village residents. The events of this first day of fieldwork brought to life important methodological lessons. How I was perceived by people would greatly influence the information given. Perceptions of me would frequently be based on previous experiences of people 'like me'. This was to continually raise ethical issues throughout my research. Honesty and explanations about my research and what would happen to the information people provided was not enough to ensure that people were fully informed about what I was doing. Assumptions and false perceptions or understanding often proved stronger than any 'explanation'. While I can never be sure whether people fully understood what it was that I was doing I aimed to ensure that they did at least trust me on a personal level.

The events of this day illustrate the way in which the women *sangathan* members behave in the manner they think will best secure them benefits from the NGO. Alongside this, however, they do resist the power of the NGO and are aware of their own resources for power. Their resistance, which I witnessed, took the form of criticising individual fieldworkers behind their backs and telling me about how they felt they had been treated badly. Some discussed asking for their savings back from the NGO and threatening to leave the *sangathan*. They recognised this as a threat they could use but to actually go through with it would have meant risking the benefits that they did receive from their membership of the *sangathan*. The other difficulty lay in the fact that they knew a collective action would be necessary and this was something they felt they could not rely on. Their ability to determine the nature of their relationship with the NGO rested in their unity as a group as did many of the activities they undertake.

In this behaviour I saw the women as more empowered than the way they had presented themselves to me at the beginning of the research period. Before I was trusted or accepted in these villages, and particularly if it was believed that I had some connection with the NGO, an unrealistic positive image of the relationship between poor village communities and *sangathan* members with the NGO and its workers was presented to me. Both NGO workers and *sangathan* members were keen to present this image to begin with.

Although these women recognise the nature of their own power and explore ways of asserting it they are restricted by their desire for or a perceived dependence on the support they do receive from the NGO. Therefore, while the *sangathan* members found ways to negotiate and manipulate the nature of their relationship with the NGO this always had to be balanced against their fears of losing support altogether.

7.5 Finding Power: Women And The State

From at least the beginning of the Indian independence movement, women in India have been perceived as having a particular and special ability to challenge the state due to their gendered position in society. Be this based on the ideals of feminine conduct or the false perception that women are somehow protected from the violence perpetuated by agents of the state (Liddle and Joshi, 1985).

The notion of women's special position in relation to representatives of the state played out in my research through the belief, held by some, that officials would not keep women waiting and that women's demands would be met more promptly and efficiently than men's.

> 'There is no problem, in fact, because I am a woman I get more respect from the ministers and the officials and they give preference to me.' *Young zilla parishad member*

> 'Because the government gives priority to women, if they are a *sarpanch* or a *ward panch*, they give priority to women. If there is some work for the men and women and if women go to the office they do the women's work first.' *Husband of a former ward panch*

> 'Even if there is a male *sarpanch* standing in front of the Collector, all the officers give priority to the women candidate. Because the government workers do not do the work, but the woman *Sarpanch* forces them: "you should do this work", and they have to do it ' *Husband of a former sarpanch*

As this last quote reveals, opinions as to why women would be given greater priority are surprising and contrary to conceptions of Rajasthani women as passive. The perception of women as less corrupt or incorruptible is of importance here. I was told that officials are afraid of women because women cannot be corrupted. One *ward panch* linked this to her believe that women are indeed becoming more aware of the workings of the political and administrative system and as such have more ammunition with which to fight against inefficiency and corruption.

The preference women may or may not receive from government officials I did not investigate. However, it is possible to speculate that the perception of women as less corrupt or corruptible could create the situation which this *ward panch* describes where by officials are more cautious in dealing with women. It should also be noted that the women politicians who reported more efficient treatment were both middle-class and educated or had the support of an outside organisation. Furthermore, it should be understood in the context of a general reforming of the *Panchayati Raj* system at the same time as the reservation of seats for women was adopted.

Despite this reported attention to the demands of women by government officials it is more common for women, and particularly poor uneducated women, to express the ways in which they feel powerless in the face of political and bureaucratic systems. This perception of their powerlessness to make changes was strikingly illustrated to me in the levels of despondency I encountered. As with women *sangathan* members, but to a lesser degree since not all those women *panchayat* representatives who I spoke with were poor, feelings of despondency in their political lives are compounded by both a lack of perceptible or real life choices, and by everyday living situations which involve a constant struggle against poverty. As discussed in Chapters Four and Six women *panchayat* representatives' feelings of powerlessness are not only rooted in the gendered restrictions placed on them but also in the ineffective and corrupt nature of the *panchayat* institutions themselves. Frequently despondency is a product of hopes and expectations remaining unfulfilled:

> 'We thought that we would fill the holes in the roads and we would cut down the *khinga* [type of tree] and put the sand on the road. If we don't have taps in the ward we would arrange that, but our work it doesn't happen.... We don't have any power.' *Older previous session ward panch*

> 'For two years we went there regularly every month, but then after two years because no work was being done we stopped going... We had left our work to go there and no one was doing anything so it was a pain. We told them about the electricity but no one notices; we could not get our work done.' *Older previous session ward panch*

> 'There was no effect from that *panchayat* body; no one used to speak and there was nothing going on. There were no decisions.... It was this monopoly: a *sarpanch* monopoly. Whatever he wanted to do he used to do, whatever he felt like doing he used to do.... I only asked for a *nulli* (open drainage ditch) and he used to say yes but nothing was done.... We didn't get any information about that [*panchayat* finances] they never said anything about those things. They used to say they had done some work like the work of Rs. 100,000 but we didn't see any work going on in the village. They used to say that a road

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had been built but only stones were laid down and they had taken the money.' *Previous session Nayak ward panch*

'I had hoped to do a lot of things, but the *sarpanch* did not listen he was engrossed in fulfilling his own demands in his own house.' *Middle aged Muslim previous session ward panch*

' The money was sanctioned and given to the *sarpanch*. Half of the money he stole midway and half of the money was spent on construction work, but he didn't use the proper cement.... Like there is a sanction for Rs 400,000 and he would spend only half the money and he didn't pay the labourers. He didn't give any wages to them and they are still crying. They are just roaming without their money.... We just left it up to him. If we wrote an application against him then maybe he would be punished but we just left it who could be bothered with that. We thought if we put a claim against him it would be very bad and ugly, we didn't want to cause trouble. We thought that the *sarpanch* is from our village so we will just tolerate him' *Young Rajput previous session ward panch*

The women I spoke with did not identify their gender as the reason for not achieving their goals. Instead they perceived their problems as lying with self-serving *sarpanches* or government officials. Of course the generalised perception of corruption and inefficiency within local politics would make this the most obvious reason available to women. However, a further possible explanation is the conception that it was not just the woman herself who held the seat but the family or herself and her husband jointly.

There are of course women who do feel that they had been able to make a difference and be effective in their political positions, such as the examples of Meenarkshiji, Poonam *Devi* and Bimla Jain given in the previous chapter. Bimlaji herself linked her ability to participate in the *panchayat* with her powerful position in her household:

'I have got power in my house. There is no power of money because there is only one earning member and there are six members. If I want to do something if I want to do something I am the *upsarpanch* and the government gives me money to do any of their work. So if I want to go and do something for the welfare of the people then the family members send me.'

In contrast to this, Manju *Devi*, also introduced in Chapter Six, saw herself as having had power on the *panchayat* during her time as *sarpanch* but that this power did not translate into any increased agency in her family. This was despite her positive opinion of the reservation of seats for women in the *panchayats* and the things she felt she had achieved as a *sarpanch*. Her whole tone and manner of speaking would change

depending on whether she was speaking about her position on the *panchayat* or her family situation, despite the two being intimately linked, as she explains:

> 'I feel if I had another chance to be a *sarpanch* then nobody would stop me. But my husband spoils the money in alcohol so how is it possible to fight an election? It costs a lot of money to fight an election. At that time [before I was elected] my husband didn't drink alcohol, after that he started. In the *panchayat samiti* somebody told him, your wife is illiterate and uneducated so you have lots of worries so you should start drinking wine and you will forget your worries.... Alcohol is a big problem in my house. When I am alone in this room I think about that and at the time I think about going to the well or the *kuwan* (well) and committing suicide'.

7.6 Finding Power: Solidarity And Leadership

When Manju *devi* spoke to a local NGO about the problem of men abusing alcohol in her village she was advised to seek the support of other women and told that it was too big a problem for her to tackle on her own.[5] Indeed the women I spoke with, particularly those from the *sangathans* emphasise the strength they found through working together:

> 'We were united so we went on the demonstration and we broke the things in the court with the help of stones.' *Older sangathan member*

> 'When women stand together they can fight, alone they can not.' *Older sangathan member*

It cannot be disputed that women, like other marginalised groups, who have an aspect of social identity in common, draw strength and hence a degree of empowerment, from solidarity with others. However, unity, interests and identity can not be assumed. People have multiple identities and while in some contexts gender identities may be foremost at other times other identities are more important, such as those associated with family, class or caste position. Often in relation to family loyalty personal rivalries and conflicts supersede gender identity. As has been stressed previously a further significant division among women in the Rajasthani context is position in the family and generational position more generally. It may be the identities of daughter, or daughter-in-law or mother-in-law which serve to divide women as a group rather than unite them. For example, in some families daughters-in-law face restrictions in

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[5] Alcohol consumption has been an important issue for the women's movement in India for two reason, the first being that links have been made between alcohol consumption and male violence and second for economic reasons with some studies citing men spending 70% of their wages of alcohol. For the historical information and some interesting case study work on this see Iliah, 1992; Kumar, 1993; Mitra, 1993 and Rao and Kulkarni, 1995. Indeed one of the *mahila sangathans* had acted to close the alcohol shop in their village.

speaking in front of their mothers-in-law when other people are around, particularly in the case of young newly married girls.[6]

Examples of disunity among women in both the *sangathans* and the *panchayats* are easy to see. This was sometimes in relation to their performance in the *sangathan* or *panchayat*, or in relation to more personal matters. I heard women *sangathan* members criticising or making serious allegations against other members. For example, several women regularly accused another woman, who ran the *Aganwari* Centre of stealing the food that had been provided. On another occasion a woman told me her husband was having an affair with one of the other members of the *sangathan*.

It is acknowledged that disagreements among the members of the *sangathan* had been an important reason for the discontinuation of work on the forestry department land, discussed in Chapter Four.

> 'The *sangathan* members lost that land, we disconnected the water due to our dispute with each other, we lost. We just fought among ourselves and we left the land. Some were working some were not, so we fought. If someone does not work then we have to fight. If I labour alone but then for getting money everyone comes there has to be a dispute. For the fruit everyone is ready to get but at the work time you will be alone.' *Older sangathan member.*

> 'First we fought together, then there was a dispute between the women. Some women said, "we did the work on the land" and other women said, "we did the work on the land"' *Older sangathan member*

The obstacles to solidarity among women members of a particular *panchayat* are demonstrated through the tendency women have to distance themselves in terms of social identity from other women members of the *panchayat*. In the main this attitude was verbalised by more confident and/or better educated women who were keen to show themselves, to me at least, as different to the majority of women who had gained seats through the reservation. This was done in an effort to distance themselves from those who were more compliant with particularly detrimental Bikaneri gender norms.

The difficulties and obstacles faced in creating and maintaining solidarity among groups of women I have divided into three categories. First, those which are part of the

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[6] I often wondered what the possibilities and potentials would be of forming organisations in the villages where I stayed which would be just for daughters-in-law.

existing social and economic structure of the time and place in which the group exists, such as class, caste or generation. Second, particular characteristics of individual members, for example, educational standard and position in the family. This category also includes such unpredictable circumstances, such as personal or family based rivalries or disputes, since these can be seen as individual circumstances which cannot be directly attributable to wider social relations. The third category contains those things that are attributable to the very formation and structure of the group itself. These divisions are influenced by such things as length of membership and position within the group. These categories, of course, interact with each other. Consequently, although they can be separated for the purposes of analysis it is not always possible to delineate them empirically. For instance a more dominant member of a group maybe in that position due to higher levels of education which, in itself maybe the consequence of being in a wealthier class group.

These categories are not just applicable to groups of women in the Rajasthani context but could be used to describe the difficulties and obstacles faced when bringing any group of people together on the basis of a particular shared identity.

7.6.1 Divisions Based On Social, Economic And Generational Social Structures

The *sangathans*, in the main, have ruled out the possibility of divisions based on generalised social delineations, except for generation, by only encouraging women from low castes and/or economically poor women to become members. Some social differences based on class and caste do exist, but they were relatively negligible. Generational divisions are far more apparent with older members tending to be more dominant and the familial positioning of daughter, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law being played out according to age and residency in either *sasural* or *pehar*. This is regardless of whether these familial ties are based on real or fictive kinship.

Contrasting with the *sangathans* the reservation for women in the *panchayats* has brought together women from very disparate social and economic groups. These divisions affect both men and women members of *panchayats*, with these types of social conflicts being most commonly manifested as a dispute between two parties or groups in the village. This is certainly the case in Kekri village, where *sarpanch* Mohini *Devi* had been charged with corruption, as referred to in Chapter Four. It was recognised that this case was a consequence of the *panchayat* being embroiled in wider

social conflicts. I believe these conflicts, also prevented the women acting in support of one another.

> 'I used to go to attend the meetings in Kotla, when I became *panch,* four or five times I went to the meeting and after that the *sarpanchni* was a little snooty towards me.... She became a bit proud, so why should I go with her.... She doesn't know how to speak, she doesn't know how to speak to other people. She was *Sarpanch* but we were also *panch* so we need some respect and she treated us like village women. She used to use very bad words, like *rand.' Older Nayak woman ward panch from Mohini Devi's session*

7.6.2 Divisions Based On Individual Characteristics And Familial Rivalries And Conflicts

It is obvious that the chances of two women from the same family being on the same *panchayat* are highly unlikely, with representation being based on residence. As such divisions constructed on the bases of familial position are minimal. Since within the membership of the *sangathans,* divisions created by position in the family were largely overcome with only one person from each household being member. However, this restriction could not be said to have had a positive outcome for solidarity among women in the village. In fact generational divisions and power dynamics influenced who would be allowed to be a member of the *sangathan.* As the excerpt from a conversation between Rupali *bai* a widowed woman in her fifties, her daughter-in law, Sita *bai,* who is in her early thirties and I, demonstrates, it was often very clear who in the family would not be permitted to be involved, even by the women *sangathan* members themselves:

> 'I can go anywhere, Bikaner, Delhi... alone, they [the NGO] taught us' *Rupali bai*

> 'No I can't go. I have not been taught by the trust' *Sita bai*

> 'But what about Rupali has she not taught you?' *researcher*

> 'She doesn't teach us, because she thinks I'll go away' *Sita bai*

> 'I have only one daughter-in-law and if she goes away, if someone takes her then what will I do?' *Rupali bai*

Along with factors, to be discussed below, in relation to the formation and operation of the *sangathans* themselves, interfamily and individual rivalries were a significant cause of friction and division among the women members. For example Shanti *bai*'s and Roshni *bai*'s (both long standing *sangathan* member) families had a history of conflict.

Roshni *bai*'s husband had lost an election to Shanti *bai*'s brother, with Roshni's family believing that the election had been rigged by the winning party in some way. This conflict had been accelerated more recently when Roshni suffered a robbery, which she believed to be the work of Shanti's nephew. She also feels that the other women members of the *sangathan* have not shown her sufficient support and not the same amount of support which Shanti *bai* had received when she had been robbed previously. This is how a very distressed and sad Roshni *bai* explained the situation and her grievances to me:

> 'Because women are influenced by their families. OK do you know what happened in Shanti *bai*'s house. All the women were with Shanti *bai*, but when my daughter's jewellery was stolen no one came with me. When I went to the police station and I was crying in front of the officials no one supported me. Not one single woman supported me. I was complaining that she is not only my daughter she is the daughter of the village and it is a very shameful thing. In her *sasural* everybody said that her father sold her ornaments, so it is a very shameful thing not just for me but for the whole village.... there is rivalry between the families, so no one can support me. If they support me they are opposing Shanti *bai*.... So no one listens to me.'

Whereas social divisions can be overcome through a recognition and focus on women's shared identity and through slow changes in the social organisation of society I acknowledge that many of these pertinent family and individual conflicts maybe insurmountable. Nonetheless, due to the pervasive nature of these conflicts I believe they should be addressed and resolved within the context of the *sangathan* to strengthen the group as a form of social support for the women involved.

7.6.3 Divisions Created Or Intensified Through The Structure And Activities Of The Group

This last category is that in which the construction of disunity among the group's members can most easily be prevented. I focus on two aspects of how the formation and subsequent operation of the *sangathans* led to disunity among the women. First, that associated with the distribution of aid and paid work. Second, that associated with the idea of creating leaders.

During the time I was researching in the villages there was one out-of-the-ordinary significant distribution of direct aid and one of giving the women and their families work in exchange for drought relief in the form of wages and food supplies. This is the

son of one *sangathan* member summing up of how the distribution of the houses after the floods has divided the women members of the *sangathan*:

> 'There are thirty-four women in the *sangathan* but only seventeen are getting houses, the other seventeen are the sufferers, so those who get the houses they are happy and those who didn't get houses they are unhappy. Urmul Trust have brought a dispute between the members of the *sangathan*. They only gave seventeen houses.' *Eldest son of a Sangathan member*

Similarly what was perceived as an inequitable distribution of paid work was causing friction:

> 'Some poor women have got work but there are other poor women who haven't got work.' *Sangathan member*

Older women who had been involved with the *sangathan* for longer periods were particularly aggrieved when they felt that more recent members were getting more benefits than them.

These examples are linked to particular events in the life of the *sangathan*. However, what has perhaps been more divisive for creating solidarity among the *sangathan* members is the different roles and positions the women feel they have in them. Some of these positions are formalised; each village's *sangathan* has a chairperson. Others are informal; NGO workers may consult with certain women in particular and certain women are more likely to be invited to events which the NGO are holding. Ganga *bai* explained to me what she felt her position in the *sangathan* to be:

> 'We don't go out of this village. We are just strong here if we start some work. We save Rs. 15 in that we are part of the *sangathan*. But these women they go out to do things, these seven women go out to bring some work.'

She also explained the power dynamics that existed within the *sangathan* membership:

> 'We don't go out of the village to faraway places. We do go for our [*sangathan*] work if we didn't go who would let us do the work, but we are not allowed to go to far away places. If we don't go then they [the dominant women] will not give us work. If we don't stay with the *sangathan*, do work [unpaid *sangathan* work, like going to meetings, paying into the saving scheme getting involved in protest activities] with the *sangathan* then they'll not keep us on the [paid] work. They tell us "if you don't support us in fights and disputes then why should we give you work, you should support us".'

In the Bhanpur *sangathan* the women do have decision making power regarding the distribution of aid and paid work. But it tended to be a core group of seven or eight

women who had this power. Other women described this situation as one they were not happy with as they are unable to have a substantial influence over the decisions of these women. The Ramtek *sangathan* also had a core group of women who had been involved for the longest and were most dedicated and most dominant in decisions making. My position as researcher in this village was, however, much more closely linked to this group of women. I stayed with the chair of the *sangathan* and her family and through her influence became associated with this core group of women. As such, I think it unlikely that any negative feelings other women had toward the power of the core group would have been expressed to me.

There are also unique circumstances in the Bhanpur village *sangathan* which may have influenced the effect of its hierarchical structure. Rohini *bai* had been exalted to a far higher position than the other women. She is on the board of directors for the Trust and as explained earlier was the main focus of a film made about the women's *sangathan*. Shanti *bai* the village *dai* and a long standing member begrudged some of this exclusive focus on Rohini *bai*:

> 'I was first [to be involved in the *sangathan*]... afterwards Rohini *bai* and the all the others like Sangeta *bai* [joined]. After that the whole village became involved.... I was the first so I had to face all the problems and I was afraid, but when Rohini *bai* and all the others got involved it was easy business. So Rohini *bai* used to say to me, you are prostitutes; a loose woman so you are involved in the *sangathan*. But after that she also joined.'

The reason that I focus on some of these, what might be described as petty squabbles among the members of the *sangathan*s, is because they are an important contributing factor to why the *sangathans* have not been able to progress and gain further independence from the initiating body. I also argue that strategies could be put in place to avoid this situation, rather than those that appear to create and reinforce it. For instance, the idea of creating leaders is dominating much of the women's empowerment literature and NGO and government discourse and practice in India. Encouraging leadership and developing individuals to be leaders or creating leaders is highly problematic within an organisation whose aim is the empowerment of women as a group and when the group's strength relies upon their shared identity and solidarity.

What is meant by creating leaders and bringing out leadership qualities in women is very hard to ascertain. The NGO workers whom I spoke with do not seem to hold a consensus on what creating a leader means. For instance one management level worker

explained her understanding of leadership as having less to do with leading others and more to do with certain qualities that could be developed:

'I think that leaders are not created; people are born with these qualities. Like when you see a play group, some children obviously take the leadership role. You can see in the household, women who have leadership qualities they take care of the decisions, so they take lots of decisions in their families. But within a narrow perspective people think that leadership is about politics. So in that scenario women are very far behind, women are on the sidelines. But that does not mean that women do not have leadership qualities they do, but they are not at that stage now.'

Another management level worker described part of the role for these particular women is to lead other women and speak out for other women:

'You can see which woman is more vocal in the meetings, which woman is giving more time to the *sangathan* activities. Because there are lots of women who are involved but they can't speak. Lots of women are involved but their families are not interested in sending them, so we can see which women have family support. There is not a particular interest in family support. We want to find out which woman can take responsibility, who is vocal who is outspoken.... The main thing is we are watching out for the woman who has leadership qualities and second the woman who the *sangathan* members send to us. Because if all the members decide on that one name then we will give her training.'

This focus on creating leaders and exalting particular women within the *sangathans* has, as described above, caused problems for the *sangathans*. This was something that was recognised by NGO workers:

'We learn from our experiences and we learn to look around us. Like in the villages when we appointed someone, a *sangathan* leader, like in politics we make a leader. But what we saw was that ultimately they just work for themselves and not for the community. So now we think about group leadership. Ultimately they may still work for themselves but there will be social pressure and so they will have to work for the community as well.'
Management level NGO worker

This section first illustrated how longstanding women *sangathan* members feel their access to material assistance from the NGO should be based on the amount of time they had dedicated to the *sangathan* whereas the NGO distributed this assistance based on where they felt it was needed. Since a consensus had not been arrived at between the women and the NGO this served not only to cause friction between NGO workers and women *sangathan* members, but also to diminish the solidarity between the *sangathan*

members. Second, this section demonstrates how the deliberate creation of leaders has divided the women and diminished possibilities for solidarity among them.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has examined some of the many power dynamics within the field of my research. This incorporated global influence based on the power of resources and the dominance of certain development discourses. It discussed how the ways in which I was perceived within the contexts of these dynamics, by those who informed the research, influenced what I was told and how the fieldwork was conducted.

The discussion has presented how women members of the *sangathans* and *panchayats* and their communities conceptualise power focusing on two aspects; one of 'power over' through physical violence and one based on authority.

The analysis of the relationship between the NGO, NGO workers and the recipients of their interventions argued that while the members of the *sangathans* were able to resist the power the NGO had over their actions ultimately the nature of this relationship was structured by the NGO. This power dynamic needs to be recognised rather than denied in order for organisations to move towards more egalitarian relationships between themselves and those who are recipients of their assistance. This section also highlighted the mutual dependency of these actors in the sustainability of the NGO and the assistance it provides.

In a similar manner women's access to power through their participation in *panchayats* is discussed. I illustrate how feelings of despondency are common. Women's gender may severely circumscribe their participation in local politics, however, the corrupt nature of and perceptions of corruption within the *panchayat* system, is a key obstacle to women not only being effective in politics but also to wanting to participate in the first place or to continue participating. As such both corruption and gender discrimination within these institutions must be overcome simultaneously.[7]

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[7] Indeed URMUL Jyoti one of the family of organisations coming under the URMUL Trust umbrella have made the fighting of corruption and people asserting their rights to government services their main priority.

The final section of the chapter discussed ideas of solidarity and leadership. It discussed how women may find power as a group as well as presenting reasons why this solidarity must not be assumed.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION
FALSE DICHOTOMIES: VICTIMS OR CHAMPIONS
Finding Power: Empowerment and Participation

The thesis has investigated women's political participation in two different institutions, *mahila sangathans* and *Panchayati Raj* institutions, initiated through very different processes for varying, but often similar, reasons. Key themes relating to gender dynamics, empowerment, participation and the operation of power have been identified as important across both spheres of participation. This conclusion further highlights these themes and locates them within gender and development and participation discourses.

The thesis has drawn attention to the importance of generation, family position, place and space in constructing women's status in the context of Northwest Rajasthan. It has highlighted the importance of why women choose to participate and the perceptions of others regarding their participation. It has discussed the ways in which women's participation in both *mahila sangathans* and *panchayat* bodies is of benefit or detriment to them as individuals and as an interest group. Feelings of fear, pride, despondency and dependency were found to be significant in women's experiences of participation. Understandings of the dynamics among the women participating, the context they participate in, the power relationships between women and the institutions they participate in, as well as, how all these dynamics are influenced by national and global politics has been discussed.

8.1 Dangerous Dichotomies: Women As Victims And Agents Of Change

One of the most pertinent themes arising during both my fieldwork research and in the literature is the use of false dichotomies and oppositional constructions of women. First, the oppositional construct in which poor (often implying rural) Indian women are presented as either silent sufferers or champions of truth and justice. Second, the contradictory arguments used to 'justify' women's participation in formal politics, or at least to 'justify' a quota system bringing women into politics, which present women as either different or equal to men. Third, the understandings of men and women as aggregate wholes in opposition to each other, found in gender and development practice and literature. Fourth, the dichotomies of 'uppers/lowers', 'urban/rural', 'insiders/outsiders', and 'rich/poor' found in participatory development literature. My

research has identified these dichotomies as being used and constructed across not only the global spaces of development theory and practice but also within national and more specifically local spaces.

Chapter Two drew attention to the presentation of Third World women, by Western and Western educated women as 'abject victims, the passive subjects of development's rescue' (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead, 2004: 1): what I have identified as processes of 'negative othering'. A starting point for this research, was my concern not to continue the practice of representing the subjects of my research in this manner, as pointed to in Chapter One. However, by the time I was writing up the research alternative, yet still essentialised, presentations of the same women had become a focus of concern: what I have identified as processes of 'positive othering'. Indeed the responsibilities and expectations being placed on these 'splendid heroines, whose unsung virtues and whose contributions... needed to be heeded' (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead, 2004: 1) was dominating my own thoughts as well as being more widely critiqued in the literature (e.g. Saunders, 2002, Battiwala and Dhanraj, 2004).

Village women are imagined to be and presented, at the local level, by more urbanised, wealthier, more educated Indian women and men and to varying degrees by different NGO workers, as 'backward', as victims of their poverty, their gender and their ignorance. Indeed in this conception village women's perceived lack of knowledge is used as a primary way to construct them as a powerless 'other'. I illustrated how women internalise this representation to some degree, but also how they use it strategically to defend themselves against the possible consequences of being knowledgeable and of speaking out. The distancing of village women from 'other' Indian women is not only a false presentation but also leads to the causes of gender discrimination being located solely within the realm of their poverty, their families and their communities rather than social and cultural factors experienced by women more generally. As one NGO worker candidly expressed to me 'empowerment is always for someone else'.

Chapters Two and Five drew attention to alternative understandings and presentations of poor rural women, and rural communities more generally, in a more positive if romanticised manner. This I identified as having developed in two forms. First, rural women and or rural communities are understood as both homogeneous harbingers of

special knowledge(s), as altruistic and concerned with equitable sustainable social development and second, as recently empowered women fighting for equity and justice.

In these constructions local knowledge is seen as something both untouched and truthful rather than something which interacts with local, national and global forces. The women participating in *sangathans* and *Panchayati Raj* institutions certainly did not see themselves as untouched by either national or global dynamics. Not only are discourses and knowledge(s) among these women influenced by wider society, but *sangathan* members are aware of how relationships between outside donors and local NGOs influence both representations of themselves and the relationship between themselves and the Trust, as illustrated in Chapters Five and Seven.

Participatory techniques fail to disaggregate and deconstruct the community instead seeing one voice as the only voice. Inter-community power dynamics and interpersonal rivalries are left outside. While URMUL Trust are themselves keenly aware of caste and economic difference, an emphasis on women's relative power resources based on position in the family, generation and location was lacking. The 'empowered women' of the *mahila sangathans* are mother-in-laws, widows and women living in their *pihar*, those women who naturally had become empowered over the course of their life cycle. Unless poor village women are further disaggregated such projects run the risk of reinforcing gender systems which exploit and disempower particular women, while they present images of empowered women.

8.2 Participation For Efficiency: Exaggerated Expectations And Instrumentalist Arguments

Two sets of rationales are used to justify a focus on and encourage women's participation in both local level development schemes and local governmental politics. The first rests on the notion that women's participation brings efficiency and as such meets the welfare needs of women's families and communities in the most effective manner. The second asserts that women's participation is a central element in bringing about women's empowerment.

Using women's efficiency, as a justification for women's participation in development has been a strategy used by Women in Development (WID) practitioners, since the early 1980s. This perspective argues for women's incorporation into development and

development projects on the basis that it will increase overall efficiency and effectiveness. It has most often been associated with economic activity and women's productive role. It has been criticised for a reliance on the elasticity of women's time and their assumed responsibility for reproduction, production and community organising work. It has also been criticised for focusing on practical gender interests over and above more strategic gender interests (Kabeer, 1994; Moser, 1993; March, Smyth and Mukhopadhya, 1999).

Instrumental arguments used to 'justify' women's participation based on a perception of women's greater efficiency leads to the participation of women becoming an aim in itself rather than a means to achieve empowerment. Chapter Four argued that this emphasis on women's efficiency and meeting practical gender interests, in the context of the *sangathans*, has led to a sidelining of more strategic interests.

Instrumentalist arguments are used in favour of quotas to bring women into governmental politics. Women are argued to be more efficient political representatives in the *panchayat* institutions due to a lesser propensity to be corrupt and a more caring nature, which will therefore, it is argued, lead to the efficient implementation of development schemes administered through the *panchayat* bodies. While family survival and welfare are paramount to both URMUL Trust and women *sangathan* members, women's motivations for participating in both *sangathans* and *panchayats* are usually not located in either instrumentalist arguments or empowerment ideals.

Proponents of the notion of women as more honest, accountable, harder working, altruistic and so forth, in the context of my research, related this to women's position as wives and mothers and to a lesser degree their religious observances as illustrated in Chapter Four. Why women's perceived altruism in the family is seen to automatically lead to their altruism and morality in the public realm is unexplained. Could it not just as easily, and absurdly, be argued that since corruption benefits the families of politicians and if women's concerns lie primarily with their family's well being, rather than the wider community, that women have a greater propensity for corruption?[1]

This thesis drew attention to the dangers inherent in these exaggerated expectations of women's participation based on the 'myth' of their greater probity and efficiency. My

own experience of challenging this myth was met with incredulity at presentations I gave in Rajasthan. With instrumentalist arguments running concurrently with arguments promoting women's right to participation, in both village level *sangathans* and *panchayat* institutions, challenges to this perspective become correlated with arguments against women's political participation. Likewise, raising objections to a system of quotas for women in *Panchayat Raj* institutions seems to be viewed, by some, as a virtual heresy. As was pointed to in Chapter Six defending women's right to and arguing for the benefits of their greater participation in politics is becoming indistinguishable from supporting a system of quotas to achieve this.

8.3 Finding Power: Assessing The Potential For Empowerment Through Participation

Chapter two discussed understandings of empowerment, while it pointed to the problematic nature of and the de-radicalisation of the term I concluded that it remains a useful concept imbued with emancipatory ideals. In this section I point to those facets of women's empowerment which have been identified as potentially empowering and those which have been identified as limiting women's empowerment through participation in this thesis.

The extra workload women's participation involves, in the context of their triple roles has been a concern to gender and development theorists. It was also a concern to some employees of URMUL Trust. However, during my research it was rare to hear women either complaining about the extra work their participation in the *sangathans* or *panchayats* gave them, even though they recognised themselves to be working and wanted to be paid for productive work, as discussed in Chapters Four and Seven. In relation to this, as evidenced in Chapter Three, all those I spoke to acknowledged the arduous nature of women's work and its importance. I do not see women's participation in either *panchayats* or *sangathans* as increasing their workload significantly. Likewise, the demands of their reproductive and productive work did not appear to restrict their participation in local political activities. Instead there is evidence that women not being present in the home was easily relieved by either other women members or in some examples sons. This was particularly the case for older women with daughters-in-law and those living in large joint households, although even among younger women time constraints were rarely raised as a reason for not participating.

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[1] I acknowledge Monika Gour as having first raised this point.

Instead for many of the women participating, particularly in the *sangathans,* the social opportunities it provided for them were both enjoyable and relaxing even if this coincided with productive or political work. Similarly their participation provided them with new social and support networks. The potential offered for women's empowerment in terms of their participation providing them with social opportunities and networks should not be understated.

Of most significance for enhancing a process of empowerment, as discussed in Chapter Six, is the pride most *sangathan* members and some *Panchayat Raj* representatives and their families feel in regard to their participation. Pride was expressed both in relation to actual achievements and simply due to the status a woman's political position gives her. Such pride can only increase self-confidence, a key requisite for empowerment. While the status garnered from participation in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions is easily recognised, women who participated in the sangathans, particularly older widowed women were accorded status due to their close links with URMUL Trust and for the activities they had been involved in. As discussed in Chapter Seven respect and status are seen as primary routes to authority and hence power in the Bikaneri context.

8.3.1 Finding Power: Women's Participation And Their Role And Status In The Family

Both NGO workers and the women themselves employed strategies to minimise male family members' objections to women's participation in the *mahila sangathans.* Detailed in Chapter Four is the provision of material benefits to women's families as a strategy to overcome family and community objections to women's participation. Consequently, all family members generally accept women's participation in the *sangathans.* Family members particularly the sons of older women were also proud of the work their mothers had been involved in. Women *panchayat* representatives also reported that their families did not object to their participation. The nuances of these statements and the limitations in gaining information on this were discussed in Chapter Six.

Polemic arguments which either state that all women representatives are surrogates for male family members or perceive women's participation to be inadequate unless they are working in isolation from their families were challenged in Chapter Six. For many women brought into politics with no political apprenticeship and particularly for women

who are illiterate family support is essential. While acknowledging politics as a family enterprise, whether it is men or women who officially hold political positions, male family members' close involvement with women's political tenure has created specific difficulties. Women are not only in need of support from male family members but are largely dependent on this support, particularly in the case of illiterate women, who have to put their thumb marks on documents which they cannot read. Male family members' decisions do not always coincide with or are not fully explained to women. Male family members maybe influenced by outside forces in ways that their wives or daughters-in-law are not. This was clearly the case for Mohini *Devi* and Manju *Devi* whose husbands' alcoholism was cited as a factor in decisions made in their name.

Similarly, in the examples of women who see themselves as fully participating in the *panchayats* the support they receive from their husbands leads to their participation not being fully recognised, either by their own family members or the community at large. The accusation that women are nothing but proxies does not only come from outside commentators but also community members. This then proves to be another way in which potentially radical changes are subsumed within existing gender norms.

Despite the difficulty in identifying concrete changes in gendered power dynamics in the context of the family what was evidenced is a general acceptance of women entering politics. Almost without exception informants did not express ideological objections to women's participation in local politics in either of the formats discussed. Objections instead rested in women's qualifications, skills and abilities to participate as discussed in Chapter Six. The reservation for women in local politics has elucidated the negative consequences of women's illiteracy and lack of education. Consequently, perhaps the most pertinent positive outcome in light of this is the desire, expressed by both men and women, to educate their daughters.

8.3.2 Finding Power: New Knowledge And Bringing Men Into Gender And Development

Women who participated in *mahila sangathans* and *panchayat* institutions emphasised the knowledge they had gained through their participation. In both cases they associated this with the increased mobility their participation had enabled. Similarly, 'learning to speak' was cited as an important skill gained through participation.

Giving or having voice has become central to ideas of empowerment. Chapter Two pointed to recent literature which has critiqued this association. While I agree with these writers arguments that giving, taking or listening to the voices of the poor, or women, does not necessarily bring about a process of empowerment and may in fact distract from 'real needs' such as control over resources, like the women I spoke to, I hold on to the idea of having voice as integrally linked to empowerment. How is it possible to know 'real needs' unless women are able to voice them to their families, their communities, the state and outside agencies. Women's voices take on a particular significance in Northwest Rajasthan where certain women's voices in certain places are literally and overtly forbidden. Women speaking in places and spaces where their voices had previously been excluded is not only part of the process of empowerment but also a measure of empowerment in itself.

The fact that both women participating in *sangathans* and *panchayats* expressed the importance of gaining voice and learning to speak leads me to believe that this is not simply an adoption of the language of development and NGOs by these women.

Women's new found knowledge was one of the most commonly cited examples of what they had gained through their participation. I highlighted in Chapter Five the problematic nature of some of this knowledge and do not need to reiterate those arguments here. Instead my primary concern is with the limitations women face in making changes based on this knowledge. While all saw the intrinsic value of knowledge there was concern around and even despondency felt due to their inability to put new found knowledge into practice.

In the context of this discussion around women's claims to new knowledge(s), in Chapter Five I made three arguments as to why men should be brought in to projects aiming to challenge detrimental gender norms. First, I argue this should be done to prevent certain issue being reinforced as women's issues only. Second, and closely related to this, is the inclusion of men to counter the perception that gender issues are women's sole responsibility. Third, in order for men to also gain new knowledge(s) and become part of the process of challenging detrimental gender norms.

Chapters Two and Five drew attention to debates around the consequences for men of women's empowerment and concluded that women's empowerment does inevitable

lead to some loss in privileges for men. I also, however, argue that men have a lot to gain from women's empowerment through a consequent change in constructions of femininity and masculinity. Some men also suffer due to gender systems privileging some men and some women over other men and other women. The most prominent example being the loss and upset men feel when their young daughters are married and move to another village, or the powerlessness they feel when their daughters are in abusive marriages.

8.3.3 Finding Power: Exceptional Women, Adaptable Women

This thesis identified certain aspects of women's behaviour as being seen as symbolic of their status. It demonstrated the ways in which these symbolic behaviours, principally the *purdah* determined practices of *ghunghat* and not speaking, are important to local discourses on women's participation in politics. These behaviours demarcated certain women as different to other women. I highlighted them as important in determining who is seen to be qualified or socially sanctioned to participate in politics. Women who are political representatives are expected to drop the most overt signs of their culturally prescribed appearance and behaviour. Women who are exceptional to the norm are those seen to have the potential to be successful in politics.

Similarly, only certain women in certain positions in both their villages and families are seen as those who should or can participate. This was shown to be most significant for participation in the *mahila sangathans*. Chapter Four evidenced how the women who were most active and who were the founding members of the *sangathans* were in particular positions in both their families and villages. They were in the main either widows, mother-in-laws or women who live in their *pihar* villages.

This strategy of only allowing certain women in certain positions to participate and seeing only exceptional women as qualified to participate is only one process in which divergent and new gendered practices are subsumed and de-radicalised within existing gender norms. Two other factors have also proven to be significant in containing potentially far-reaching changes within existing gender norms. First, as discussed in Chapters Three and Five, in the context of Northwest Rajasthan women's identities are exceptionally adaptable according to place, most significantly in moves from *pihar* to *sasural* village. This allows women's behaviour to be substantially different in one

place without causing change in another. As such women's empowerment in one space can easily be contained and not necessarily transfer to other spaces.

Second, as discussed in Chapters Five and Six, in relation to the quota for women in *Panchayati Raj* institutions, the gendered segregation of space both literally and in the common imagination serves to limit the impact of thousands of women entering local political institutions. In the context of physical space women most commonly sit separately to men during meetings, enabling their presence to be both disregarded and accepted. In the common imagination general seats have now become men's seats with women only seeing themselves as 'allowed' to stand for election to seats reserved for them. As Goetz (2003:13) discussing reserved seats for women in Uganda also observes women's political engagement has become separated 'from the mainstream of political competition'.

The ability of gender norms to subsume potential challenges demonstrates how the power to maintain gender hierarchies operates most effectively beyond the realms of the decision making and through the control of culture and socialisation.

I do, however, acknowledge limits in the ability to contain these quite drastic changes in gendered behaviour. As discussed in Chapter One the gender and politics literature has been concerned to broaden what is meant by political activity, considering women's informal community organising as political for example. Within the context of Bikaner, where women's mobility and association is highly circumscribed, even the smallest action such as leaving the confines of ones home to attend a meeting and speaking in specified public and private spaces in ones *sasural* village can be considered a political activity. Such activities cannot but have some impact on both the women participating and the wider community.

These contradictory arguments highlight that while women entering political spaces is indeed a momentous change the potential for such radicalism is to varying degrees contained within existing gender systems. Furthermore, contradictory arguments make it clear that the causes of women's detrimental position in gender systems are complex and therefore simplistic one-dimensional solutions will not work.

8.3.4 The Ethics Of Participation: Fear, Corruption And Limited Choices

The fact that corruption has been mentioned in most chapters of this thesis illustrates the inextricable role it plays in both the practice of politics and in constructing people's perceptions of politics and politicians.

The corrupt and often ineffectual nature of the *panchayat* bodies greatly influences both women's ability to participate and how they feel about their participation. This thesis identified two dominant consequences regarding the nature of corruption and its impact on women's participation. First, women's ability to participate in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions is highly circumscribed by the very operation and culture of the panchayat institution in which they are representatives. As discussed in Chapter Six the less accountable a *panchayat* body is the more difficult it is for women to participate. In most examples meetings do not happen on a regular basis and the activities of the *panchayat* body are controlled by the *sarpanch* (or her husband) their cronies and other influential government officials to their own advantage. This has left most of the women I spoke to feeling extremely despondent and disempowered by their participation.

Second, Chapter Four revealed how many women feel forced into their participation in *panchayat* bodies and fearful of the consequences of their participation due to the corrupt nature of these institutions. Mayaram (2000: 42) reports that most women felt forced to participate by family members. However, she does not see this as a particular hindrance to women's empowerment and instead anticipates that due to 'women's emergent political ambitions' there is likely to be a change in their motivations next time. I found no change in women's perceptions of their participation from those elected in 1995 and those elected in 2000. However, my main concern is with the ethics of a situation in which women are 'forced' into activities which are potentially detrimental to their well-being.

The discussion on empowerment in Chapter Two pointed out that '[o]ne way of thinking about power is in terms of the *ability to make choices:* to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice' (Kabeer: 1999: 436). Choice was something many women felt they had little of in regard to their participation in *Panchayati Raj*

institutions. Instead, in agreement with Nanivadekar (1998), I see women's participation in the *Panchayati Raj* institutions as another form of exploitation, for some women:

> 'Some proxy women are forced into politics by their family against their own wish. They are further pressurised to resort to corrupt practices. At least in the case of these women reservation has become yet another form of exploitation'. (ibid: 1815 – 6)

Perhaps one of the most empowering decisions a woman could make in the context of participation in *Panchayat Raj* institutions is to decide not to participate at all.

The reason I highlight this as an ethical issue is that even if we could know for certain that the quota system for women will greatly alter detrimental gender relations, increase women's well-being and even clean up local politics, can the un-chosen sacrifices being made by these women ever be justified? Can women's empowerment ever rest on the suffering of other women? Even if ninety percent of women who have come into politics through this method are pleased to now be participating, does that justify the distress caused to women like Mohini *Devi* in Kekri village, Ganga *Bai* in Nakhtarana and Neela *Bai* in Kapurthala ?

Working to change a system so that women are able and willing to participate seems more beneficial than simply enforcing their participation and expecting the very system which they were previously excluded from to change as a consequence.

Chapter Seven showed how *sangathan* women's stories are also imbued with feelings of despondency, related to the dependency these women feel towards URMUL Trust. This dependency is an outcome of the way in which women's participation in the *sangathans* has been organised and developed. High levels of support had been withdrawn before these women felt they could act without considerable support. Although there are many factors limiting women's empowerment through participation in *mahila sangathans*, well thought out withdrawal strategies on the part of the initiating NGO, which the *mahila sangathan* members were made fully aware of, could mediate some of the worst feelings of disappointment and despondency as support is withdrawn.

8.4 Conclusions And Ways Forward

This thesis has revealed ways in which women's participation in both the *Panchayati Raj* institutions and *mahila saganthans* has encouraged processes of women's empowerment. For example the pride felt by some women in relation to the activities

and organisations they have become involved in and the respect some women have garnered from their families and communities which increases their levels of authority in their communities. Women's knowledge of the operation of local politics and their awareness of the operation of gender dynamics have increased. Finally, women's and to a degree men's hopes and aspirations for their daughters have changed as a result of women's participation.

However, as this chapter has clarified there are specific areas in which women's empowerment through participation in local politics is restricted. It has pointed to the dangers inherent in dichotomous representations and oppositional constructs of Indian women. Future research and promotional materials coming from international organisations, national governments and NGOs must move beyond such easy presentations of complex realities. Likewise, local NGOs have a responsibility to find ways to challenge these conceptualisations as they are played out within their own organisations and the areas where they work.

Instrumentalist arguments for women's incorporation into both development and formal politics have been shown to be detrimental to the potential for women's empowerment through participation. The arguments I have presented point to the imperative for feminists to resist the temptations of instrumentalist arguments. Women's 'right' to political participation being based on anything less that a 'right' will be detrimental in the long run.

Whether perceived as victims or champions of development it seems that all the responsibility for change is being laid at the feet of poor village women: an unjust and unattainable expectation.

The role of the family in women's empowerment is a crucial area for concern. This thesis showed that at least on an ideological abstract level male family members are in support of women's political participation and at times provide practical support. The inclusion of men into projects challenging gender hierarchies and the recognition of men's role in overcoming detrimental gender norms and constructions of femininity and masculinity is imperative. This is a challenge which both policy makers and development practitioners cannot afford to ignore.

Researchers, policy makers and development practitioners need to further disaggregate women in their conceptions, policy aims and practices. It is routinely accepted that in order to understand gender dynamics the effects of class, ethnicity, caste and religion need to be taken in to account. This thesis has made the case, at least in the context of Northwest Rajasthan, how generation, residency, place and position in family are of equal importance in determining a woman's status. Disaggregating women has always been problematic as Jackson (1998: 8) points out, 'recovering a female subject risks essentialism; refusing a female subject risks erasing gender difference'. A challenge regardless of whether what divides women is class and caste or generation and family position.

Finally, my research has demonstrated in a myriad of ways how women's participation is not necessarily empowering for them. It has also identified ways in which certain types of political participation initiated in particular ways can have detrimental consequences for individual women's well being. This research has consequently demonstrated that participation does not necessarily equate with empowerment and political participation is, therefore, not a good measure of women's empowerment.

APPENDIX ONE
RESEARCH INFORMANTS[1]

Panchayati Raj Institutions

<u>Nakhtarana *Gram Panchayat*</u>

Current members

Sarpanch – a *Jat* woman in her mid-thirties

Upsarpanch – a *Jain* woman in her mid-thirties – separate interview with her husband

Ward panch – a young *Jat* woman

Ward panch – a middle-aged *Bhat* woman

Previous session

Ward panch – an older *Marli* (high caste) woman

Ward panch – a middle-aged Muslim woman – separate interview with her husband

Ward panch – an older *Khumar* (traditionally a caste of potters)

Focus Group

Focus group with six current *panchayat* representatives and four women who were attending the *gram sabha.*

Interviews with other village residents (unrecorded)

3 women and 4 men – mixed castes and ages

<u>Kekri *Gram Panchayat*</u>

Previous session

Ward panch – Older *Nayak woman*

Ward panch – Young *Rajput* woman

Interviews with other village residents (unrecorded)

6 women and 7 men – mixed castes and ages

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[1] These lists only includes those I conducted recorded interviews with and unrecorded but organised deliberate interviews with village residents. It does not include the numerous people I held either shorter, unrecorded or more spontaneous conversations with.

Kapurthala *Gram Panchayat*

Current member

Ward panch – older Muslim woman – separate interview with her husband

Previous session member

Ward panch – young *Sansi* (seen as one of the lowest castes, they are responsible disposing of dead animals in the village) woman

Rawatsar *Gram Panchayat*

Current session

Ward panch – young *Khati* (carpenter caste) woman – separate interview with her husband

Previous session

Sarpanch – older *Sath* woman – separate interview with her husband

Nakhtarana *samiti* level representatives

Current session

Pradham – young *Jat* woman

Member – middle-aged *Brahmin* woman – separate interview with her husband

Zilla Parishad members

Current session

Young *Choudhary* woman – separate interview with her father-in-law

Older *Choudhary* woman – separate interview with her husband

Older *Khumar* – woman – interviewed with her husband

Previous session

Older *Rajput* woman – separate interview with her husband

Other *Panchayat* Representative

Previous session

Middle-aged *Rajput ward panch* – separate interview with her husband

Middle-aged *Rajput samiti panchayat* member – separate interview with her husband

Young *Choudhary sarpanch* – separate interview with her husband

Mahila Sangathans

Ramtek

Sangathan members

Six Older *Meghwal* women

One older *Jat* woman

Two middle-aged *Meghwal* women

Family members

Husbands of one older and one middle-aged *Meghwal* women

Other village residents

Four men and five women of mixed ages and from mixed caste groups

Focus group with eight *sangathan* members

Bhanpur Station

Sangathan members

One older *Meghwal* woman

One young *Rajput* woman

Five older *Nayak* women

One middle-aged *Nayak* woman

Two younger *Nayak* women

Family members

The middle-aged sons of two of the older women.

The husbands of the three younger women

The brother of one older woman

Other Village Residents

Ten women and six men

NGO Workers

Two management level women employees (both previously fieldworkers)

Three management level male employees (one previously a fieldworker)

Two male field worker

Two women field workers

I held numerous conversations with other NGO workers some of whom became personal friends. I stayed for my first four months in Bikaner, when not in the villages, with a woman NGO worker and her family.

I also had long conversations with Management level employees of the Hunger Project in Jaipur

INTERVIEW GUIDES[1]

Women *Panchayat Raj* Representatives[2]

PART ONE – Personal details

1. Living arrangements

2. Family members (both *pihar* and *sasural*)

3. Personal details and life history

4. Wealth and employment

5. Domestic arrangements

6. Mobility

PART TWO - Political Participation

A. Decision to become involved

1. Decision to stand for election and election campaign

2. Thoughts and feelings around the decision – her, her family's and the community's

3. Anyone particularly supportive, resistant or concerned about her becoming involved?

B. Other family members involvement in politics/village organisations

C. Prior involvement in politics or community organising

D. Nature of participation

1. Responsibilities

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[1] Interview guides were adapted throughout the course of the research and adapted according to the experiences and the personal history of the person being spoken to and what information I already new about them. (Some people I had known for several months before I interviewed them). The order in which questions were asked and the way in which questions were asked varied considerably. Sometimes the person who I was speaking to led the interview to some degree telling me what they felt was important. This was more likely to happen among those who had known me for sometime. All interviews were structured around women's stories of their lives and their political participation. Women's thoughts and feelings about events were constantly asked for. Consequently these outlines are only <u>very</u> rough guides to the issues covered in the interviews.

[2] Interviews with other family members were structured along similar lines with appropriate adjustments made.

2. Time given to *panchayat* work

3. What learnt since having seat

4. Meetings: When are they held?

> Do you attend – *if not why not?*
>
> What happens at the meetings?
>
> What is currently being discussed in the *panchayat?*

5. Do people of the village/community come to you and discuss things with you?

E. Aims and objectives related to her participation

1. What do/did you hope to achieve while you hold/held your position?

2. Had you thought about this/these issues before?

3. Who do/did you discuss these issues with?

4. How do/did you plan to go about achieving this/these objective(s)?

F. Support from others and difficulties encountered

1. Relationships with other members of *panchayat*

2. Who supports her in her participation

3. Ways in which things have worked well

4. Difficulties faced and how overcome

5. Main problems which women in general face

G. Other members of panchayat

1. Details and opinions on other *panchayat* representatives

H. Access to information

1. How information is gained

2. Discuss important recent event in village, in district, in India

I. General attitude towards women having seats in the panchayats

1. General opinion on women participating in local politics

2. Knowledge of and thoughts/opinions on the quota system

3. What she feels other members of her family and community think about this

4. How does she feel about people saying women in the *panchayats* are just proxy representatives

5. What she thinks could assist women who have seats on the *panchayats*.

J. Hopes and aspirations

1. What she had hoped/hopes to achieve

PART THREE – Return to family and generalised opinions

A. Managing household responsibilities with political work

B. Decision making

1. Household survival strategies
2. Children's education and marriages
3. Dispute resolution

C. Aspiration for children

D. Differences in her life compared to her mothers

E. Personal changes since having her seat

B. What does she enjoy or not enjoy in her life

F. Main difficulties family faces

G. Closing questions

1. Has having your seat on the *panchayat* effected any other aspects of your life which we have not talked about?
2. What do you feel are the most important issues for women in the village?

PART ONE – Personal details

7. Living arrangements

8. Family members (both *pihar* and *sasural*)

9. Personal details and history

10. Wealth and employment

11. Domestic arrangements

12. Mobility

PART TWO - Political Participation

A. URMUL first coming to village

1   What they did

2   What villagers thought of them

3   What she thought about it all

B. Becoming involved

1   Why she became involved - aspirations

2   Family and community members reactions

3   Difficulties/benefits when first involved

B. Other family members involvement in politics/village organisations

C. Prior Involvement in politics or community organising

D. Nature of her participation

1. What the *sangathan* does

2. What things she is/has been involved in

3. Her thoughts and feelings around these

4. Others thoughts and feelings around these

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[3] Interviews with *sangathan* members were particularly flexible, by the time I interviewed them, many of these women knew me well and knew the types of things I had asked other women during their interviews. Consequently, they would sometimes take the lead in the interviews and launch into stories of their participation, how they felt about URMUL Trust and so on and so forth

E. Aims and objectives of the sangathan

F. Support from others and difficulties encountered

1. Who supports her in her participation

2. Ways in which things have worked well

3. Difficulties faced and how overcome

4. Main problems which the women members in general face

G. Other members of the sangathan

1. Details and opinions on other *sangathan* members

2. Relationships with other members of *sangathan*

H. Access to information

1. How information is gained

2. Discuss important recent event in village, in district, in India

I. General thoughts and feelings about the mahila sangathans

J. Hopes and aspirations

1. What she hoped to achieve by becoming involved

2. What she feels she has achieved

PART THREE – Return to family and generalised opinions

A. Managing household responsibilities with sangathan work

B. Decision making

1. Household survival strategies

2. Children's education and marriages

3. Dispute resolution

C. Aspirations for her children

D. Differences in her life compared to her mothers

E. Personal changes since being involved

B. What does she enjoy or not enjoy in her life

F. Main difficulties family faces

G. Closing questions

1. Has being involved with the *sangathan* affected any other aspects of your life which we have not talked about?
2. What do you feel are the most important issues for women in the village?

NGO Workers[4]

1. Personal Story of working with URMUL Trust

2. Their own family and personal background

3. History of URMUL Trust

4. Experiences relating to URMUL Trust first working in the villages where I was working

5. How the *mahila sangathans* were established

6. Motivations for working with women

7. Aims and objectives of the *mahila sangathans*

8. *Sangathans* organisation, conditions of memberships, general history

9. Stories regarding the things the *mahila sangathans* have done, with particular attention paid to key events

10. Other things URMUL Trust are involved in

11. Relationships between different women members in the *sangathans*

12. Main difficulties encountered in carrying out their work, with particular reference to working with the *mahila sangathans*

13. Gender dynamics within URMUL Trust

14. Future aspirations for the *mahila sangathans*

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[4] These interviews varied considerably depending on who I was speaking to, their role in the NGO, when they had worked in the villages whose *mahila sangathans* I was researching and so on and so forth. As such I have provided a list of the themes we talked about.

15. Thoughts, feelings and experiences regarding women's participation in the *panchayats*.

16. Opinions on the quota system in general

Village Residents Interview Guide[5]
Participation in *Panchayati* Raj institutions
Kekri Village

1.   General biographical information

2.   Who is your ward *panch*?

3.   Did you vote in the last *panchayat* election?

4.   Does anyone in your family have a seat in any *panchayat* body?

5.   Are you involved in politics in any manner?

10. Which groups of people have a reservation on the *panchayat* and how do you feel about this?

11. Did you know that there is a reservation for women?

12. Do you know the percentage of seats which are reserved for women?

13. When was the reservation brought in?

14. Why was it brought in?

15. What do you think are the main difficulties that the members of the *panchayat* face are?

16. What do you think the effects of women having seats on the *panchayats* will be?
     a) On the general running of the *panchayat*?
     b) On the women members of the *panchayat*?
     c) On the male members of *panchayat*?

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[5] These guides were initially designed as questionnaires, hence the more structured lay out. However, they almost always turned into semi-structured conversational interviews

d) On women's position in society?

e) In your village?

17.   How well do you think women perform in the *panchayat*?

18.   Would you like a woman in your family to have a seat on the *panchayat*?

a) wife

b) daughter

c) daughter-in-law

d) mother

19.   **Mohini *Devi* Case:**

a) We are aware that Mohini *Devi* the former ward panch of your *panchayat* has been arrested, could you tell me what your thoughts and feelings about the case are?

b) How aware do you think she was of the corruption that was going on?

c) Do you think other people were involved as well?

d) I understand they brought a case against Gurnam Singh, do you know anything about that?

20.   **Corruption in General**

a) Is this type of corruption common in the *panchayat* system?

b) Do you think the reservation for Scheduled castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes and women impact on levels of corruption?

c) What do you think is the best way to over come the corruption in the system?

Village Residents Interview Guide

Participation in *Panchayati Raj* Institutions

Nakhtarana – conducted with people attending the *gram sabha*

1.   Why are you here today at this *gram sabha*?

2.   Does anyone in your family have a seat in any *panchayat* body?

3.   Are you involved in politics in any manner?

4.   General biographical information

5.   Do you know which groups of people have a reservation on in the *panchayat?*

6.   Did you know that there is a reservation for women?

10.   What percentage of seats are reserved for women?

11.   When was the reservation brought in?

12.   Why was it brought in?

13.   What do you think are the main difficulties which members of the *panchayat* face?

14.   What do you think the effects of women having seats on the *panchayats* will be?
       a) On the general running of the *panchayat?*
.   b) On individual women?
       c) On women's position in society?
       d) In your village?

15. How well do you think women perform in the *panchayat*?

16. Would you like a woman in your family to have a seat on the *panchayat*?

    a) wife

    b) daughter

    c) daughter-in-law

    d) mother

Village Residents Interview Guide
Participation In *Mahila Sangathans*

1.   Are any of your family members in the *sangathan*?

2.   Have any members of the family had any dealings with either the *sangathan* or
      URMUL Trust itself in the past?

3.   General biographical information, including length of having lived in village.

4.   What do you know about the activities of the *mahila sangathan*?
           Thoughts feelings on these activities

5.   Questions specific to the activities of the particular *mahila sangathan* in the
      village.

6.   Why do you think the *sangathan* is for women only?

7.   Do you know any of the individual women involved?

8.   What benefits do you think the women involved have gained through their
      involvement?

9.   Do you think the women who are involved have changed in anyway due to their
      involvement?

10.   Do you think other women in the village have gained any benefits from the
       sangathan and/or do you think it has made any changes in the lives of other
       women in the village?

11.   Do you think the village as a whole has changed due to the women's *sangathan*?

12.   What do you think the *sangathan* could be doing to improve the lives of women
       in the village?

13. Why are you or none of the women in your family involved in the *sangathan*?

14. Would you like to become involved/see the women in your family becoming involved?

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