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# **'The Two-Sided Family'**

**The Impact of the Family and Everyday Life on Women's Political  
Participation in Rural Karnataka**

**Louise Nolle\***

**Working Paper No 22  
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**Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies  
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## Abstract

The purpose of this study has been to explore the impact of everyday life and the family on women's political participation in India. This has been done by analysing the political life stories of nine women who have all been elected to the local governance system, Panchayati Raj, in the South Indian state of Karnataka. The family often plays a dual role in relation to women's political participation by on the one hand controlling her activities and on the other hand providing her with support and advice that a politically inexperienced woman cannot afford to be without. The controlling role of the family is especially explicit in the notion of *proxy* where the husband does most of the political work on behalf of his wife. Even though they begin their political careers as proxies the women may still develop into more independent politicians. The experience of participating in Panchayat activities has opened up a whole new world for some women while others perceive it as a burden.

**Keywords:** India, women, political participation, the family

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A student also needs encouragement sometimes!

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# 1. Introduction

Women in Third World countries often do not participate in politics on an equal level with men. The specific structure of the political system as well as women's responsibilities in the private sphere have been held out as reasons for this discrepancy (Waylen 1996: 11-12). Another word for the private sphere is that of the family within which the woman spends much of her time taking care of the household and the children. Furthermore, the family often has a great impact on women's mobility and her access to certain resources.

On April 24 1993, the Indian government ratified the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment in which one third of the seats in the local governance system of Panchayati Raj<sup>1</sup>, were reserved for women. Over a fairly short period of time close to one million women were elected to the previously male dominated local governance councils across the country. This introduction of a special quota for women within the public sphere of politics may to some degree have changed the political structure of this system to the advantage of women. What this change in structure has meant in regard to the everyday life of women and especially their relation to their families is the central concern of this thesis.

## 1.1 Purpose and research questions

The extraordinary influx of women into the Panchayat system has inspired many scholars to write about the issue. Most of these studies are quite broad in the sense that they seek to explore both how the structure of the political system affects women's participation as well as how this participation is viewed by male Panchayat members, male relatives, the other women of the villages as well as the elected women themselves.<sup>2</sup> The family is often mentioned in these studies but only as one of many variables that affect women's participation. Not many studies have taken a point of departure in just one aspect. I find it interesting and relevant to focus on one side of their participation: the role of the family and how it affects their participation. The private sphere of the family is an area to which legislators and women's groups have very little access and where any improvement in the status of women does not happen as easily as in a more public setting. Women's participation in the Panchayat system may be one way of improving the status of women within the family. At the same time I do not deny that there are other aspects

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<sup>1</sup> *Panchayat* is a Hindi word that originally means 'a council of five.'

<sup>2</sup> View for example Hust (2004), Datta (1998) and Bryld (2000 and 2001)



that affect women's political participation of which some will also be mentioned and discussed in the thesis.

Based on these considerations the following research questions have been made:

*1. How has the everyday life of women influenced their political participation?*

*2. Which role does the family play in connection with women's political participation?*

Both questions are interrelated, as the family constitutes a great part of the everyday life of women.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Political life stories**

In order to investigate the above-mentioned questions I have used a case study method that in the words of Yin can be used to "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events- such as individual life cycles" (Yin 1994: 3). Since I take a point of departure in the experience of elected women I have elaborated on the notion of life cycles by using the so-called *life-story* approach to frame the interview questions. According to Bertaux and Kohli, this approach is basically a method of collecting data that refers to "the totality of a person's experience" (Bertaux 1984: 217). This can be done in several ways and I have chosen to study the "perceptions, values, definitions of situations, personal goals" of the respondents (ibid: 219). The personal goals have been further translated into the notion of *aspirations* that the Indian anthropologist Appadurai defines as a kind of 'cultural capacity' that deals with "the wants, preferences, choices and calculations" of a particular person (Appadurai 2004: 67). In this particular context I have chosen to focus on the part of the women's life stories and aspirations that deal with their political participation. The empirical part of the thesis has been structured according to this approach into the beginning, the present and the future of women's experience in politics.

## 2.2 Methods and respondents

The primary data of this thesis is based on the qualitative fieldwork that was conducted in the state of Karnataka and consists of 9 semi-structured interviews with 7 present and 2 former female members from 6 different Gram Panchayat councils across two districts. A semi-structured interview is like a conversation where it is possible to include the view of the respondent and additional questions can be asked that may lead to new and unexpected information. In order to get an impression of the relationship between the women, their families and other people of their community, I had short and rather informal conversations with family members and neighbours of the elected women that were present during the interviews as well as with 3 male Panchayat members.<sup>3</sup> I have also done 4 interviews with the staff from the Institute of Social Sciences in both Delhi as well as Bangalore and an interview with Ms Evelin Hust about her research in Orissa.

During the interviews I had the opportunity to do observations in the home of the respondent where I also noticed the relation between the elected woman and her family. Furthermore, I did some participant observation at the home of one interpreter who also acted as my respondent and at a training seminar for elected women.

The secondary data of the thesis is mainly based on the qualitative studies of other scholars on women and political participation in India. Most of this literature is written within a feminist discourse.

## 2.3 Language, access and selection of respondents

All the main respondents spoke the local language of Kannada and could not speak English, which meant that it was necessary for me to work with an interpreter. Altogether I had three interpreters who were all women and who worked for different NGOs in the districts of Kolar and Bangalore Urban. These women played a dual role as they both acted as my interpreters and my gatekeepers.<sup>4</sup> It was important that the interpreter had knowledge and experience of working with rural women in order to have this dual role. The outcome of the interviews depended to a large extent on the relation between

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<sup>3</sup> None of the interviews with the main informants were recorded due to two reasons. First of all, I felt that it would disturb the respondent's flow of talking. Secondly, the circumstances of the interviews were such that I was hardly ever alone with the respondent and my interpreter. Often, family members and neighbours wanted to share their views with me, which together with the language barrier would have made the transcription of the interviews too complicated. This is why the quotes from the interviews are written in the third person.

<sup>4</sup> A gatekeeper is a person who gives the researcher access to the field. The notion is often used in anthropological studies.

the informant and the interpreter. I doubt that I would have had any access to the women if I had shown up with a smartly dressed college student from Bangalore City as my interpreter.

The first criteria of selection, was that the respondents should be present or former members of a Gram Panchayat council.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it was my intention to interview women with different backgrounds in terms of age, economic position, caste, religion and experience within the Panchayat system. Due to the dual role of the interpreter most of the interviews were done with women whom the interpreters knew or had met before. As such the selection of informants was based on a combination of my wishes and the contacts and connections of the interpreters. It was both a disadvantage and an advantage in those cases where the interpreter knew the respondents well. The respondent clearly felt more comfortable and the interpreter could subsequently tell me additional things of a more sensitive nature that the respondent would not have told me directly after having known me only for a few hours. However, the respondent may also have thought that the interpreter expected a particular answer from her. Sometimes the interpreters would mix their own interpretations into the answers of the respondents, which I had to sift out in my field notes. This could have affected the reliability of the data.

In one case the interpreter Geeta also became my respondent as she had been previously elected to the Panchayat and could tell me many interesting things about her experiences there.

## **2.4 Biases, validity and ethical considerations**

The process of selection affected the outcome of the interviews in regard to bias and validity. All nine respondents were from the Hindu community and I have only done one interview with a woman from a low caste community who was elected within a specific quota reserved for women from the government designated categories of Scheduled Caste and Tribe. The rest of the women were elected within the *general lady's* quota, which is reserved for women who belong to high castes and OBC communities.<sup>6</sup> Excluding the woman from the low caste community, who were illiterate, all the women had a minimum of 7

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<sup>5</sup> Gram Panchayat is the lowest level of the local governance system.

<sup>6</sup> OBC stands for 'Other Backward Caste' and consists of people who are neither high or low castes. Special quotas for under-privileged caste groups in relation to education and jobs were introduced in India after the Independence so the introduction of quotas are not something new. However, it is still a widely debated issue.

years of education.<sup>7</sup> These biases may have affected the validity of the study. On the other hand the respondents had different backgrounds in terms of their age and experience within the Panchayat system.

I have chosen to secure the anonymity of the respondents and one of the interpreters by changing their names and by not mentioning the name of their village and Gram Panchayat. Even though they may not feel that they have told me anything that was controversial, I find that some of the information that was given to me was of such a sensitive character that it justifies this change, especially in regard to the issue of corruption.

### **3. Outline of thesis**

The following part of the thesis is divided into four sections. In the first section the background of the Panchayat system and women's quota is briefly explained. It is followed by an introduction of the main theoretical concepts of the thesis in which the notions of *proxy* and *the political family* will be discussed with a point of departure in the empirical material of other scholars. The empirical section presents the political life-stories of the respondents, which have been divided according to the past, (their entry into the Panchayat), the present (the issue of time, mobility and support) and the future of their political participation in terms of their political aspirations. Finally, the thesis ends with a discussion where I seek to relate the theory to the empirical material.

## **4. Background**

### **4.1 Women's inclusion into the Panchayat system**

In a country where the majority of the population lives in rural areas, the first Post-Independent rural development programme was launched in 1952. In 1959 a report from a government-appointed committee declared that this programme had failed because of the absence of participation from the local population and recommended that a local self-governance system should be introduced to make people more involved in the development of their own

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<sup>7</sup> The literacy rate for women in Karnataka is 57,45%. One reason for the rather good educational background of the respondents may be that 6 of the interviews were conducted in the district of Bangalore Urban that has the highest literacy rate among women in Karnataka (HDR 2005: 19).

community. This system was then introduced in a few states, including Karnataka, but not on a federal level. The report also recommended that a few women with a particular interest in the issue of women and children could be 'co-opted' in the local governance institutions. But no real quotas for women were proposed. In the 1970s international focus on women's issues and development began to affect the policies of the Indian government and in the following decade, several government appointed committees investigated the status of women in India. In 1985 under a Rajiv Gandhi-led government, a report stated that it was no longer enough just to 'co-opt' a few women in the local governance councils if more women were to participate in politics. (Hust 2004: 58-60). This eventually led to the introduction of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment that was enacted in December 1992 and finally ratified on April 24 1993. With this piece of legislation the issue of rural development and women's development was finally combined.

Karnataka plays a special role in terms of the introduction of women's quota in local governance politics, as it was the first state to introduce a women's quota as a part of the Panchayat Act from 1985. Twenty-five percent of the seats were here reserved to women in a two-tier system (Subha 2001: 101-102). This means that Karnataka has had an extra election period with the women's quota compared to the other states of India.<sup>8</sup>

There are several different arguments as to why these quotas were successfully introduced. Mayaram claims that they are a result of a long battle that was fought by the women's movement of India (Mayaram 2003: 246). Hust notices that the amendment was ratified without much discussion compared to the many discussions and difficulties that followed the suggestion to introduce the same quota system in the state legislative assemblies and the parliament in Delhi. Furthermore, she argues that the Indian women's movement mostly consists of urban-based women and that rural women were not mobilised to agitate for the quota system before it was introduced. It has resulted in a lack of both political and gender awareness among the women who were supposed to be the actual beneficiaries of the system (Hust 2004: 257-58). It is an aspect that has manifested itself in the poor turnout of women candidates during the first elections. On the other hand Hust argues that many women would not have been able to participate in the Panchayat system without the introduction of the special quotas (ibid). In this way she presents the main arguments for and against the quota system. Considering

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<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is stated that Rajiv Gandhi used the situation in Karnataka as a positive example for the new Amendment as he invited the state's Secretary for Rural Development and architect behind the 1985 Act, Abdul Nazir Sab, to help him 'nationalise the Karnataka experiment' (Mayaram 2003: 273).

the story of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment and the women's quota, which is full of government-appointed committees and official reports, there is no doubt that the 'battle' for the women's quota in the local governance bodies has mainly been fought on a high political level rather than on a grass-root level.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4.2 The structure and function of the Panchayat system**

Each state has its own Panchayat Act where the different required provisions from the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment are implemented. Overall, the system is organised into three tiers or levels, which from the bottom and up consists of Gram Panchayat, Block and District level. They are planned according to the size of the population with app. 15000 people to each Gram Panchayat. Each elected member represents around 400 people and is elected within a ward that consists of one or more villages depending on the population size of the villages. The local governance councils deal with 29 issues related to rural development, which includes infrastructure, water supply, schools and health-care (Rai 2006: 229-230).<sup>10</sup>

One third of the seats on all three levels of the Panchayat system are reserved for women. Within the quota system a specific number of seats are reserved for women from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The quotas also cover the posts of Panchayat president and vice president. With every election the number and types of seats will rotate and shift from one constituency to another in order for all areas to benefit from the system. This often means that women, who entered the Panchayat on a reserved seat, and who want to re-contest, either have to compete on an open seat mostly against men or are forced to leave politics (ibid: 234).

Since the introduction of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment in 1993, Karnataka has had three elections to the Gram Panchayat level in 1993, 2000 and 2005 respectively with a by-election in 1995. The next election is scheduled to be held in 2010. Most of the elected members in Karnataka participate in government or NGO run training seminars in which they are taught about the basic structure of the system as well as practical matters in relation to the implementation and administration of development projects that benefit the local community. The elected women constitute the main target group of many NGOs while the state government train both men and women. In addition to that many elected women are also members of the so-called Self-

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<sup>9</sup> Today, many grass-root movements and NGOs are engaged with the training of elected women representatives.

<sup>10</sup> View Annex A

Help-Groups that mostly function as micro-credit institutions. Legislators and NGOs hope that the groups will also deal with social and family related issues and view them as a tool for the empowerment of women (HDR 2005: 197).<sup>11</sup> The nine respondents come from the two districts of Kolar and Bangalore Urban that are situated in the Southeastern part of the state. Kolar district consists of a largely rural based population while Bangalore Urban is divided between the municipal area of Bangalore City and the more rural dominated Taluks of Bangalore South, Bangalore North and Anekal.<sup>12</sup>

## **5. Theoretical key concepts**

### **5.1 The division of the public and the private sphere**

In an article on women in politics in the Third World, Waylen argues that the division of the public and the private sphere is a central aspect in the discussion on gender and politics. She further argues that Western liberal democracy and democratic theory is based on this division. Even though it may be formally a gender-neutral division, she criticises it for “maintaining a division between men and women, where men can only be abstract individuals’ as women are still considered to belong in the private sphere and men in the public sphere” (Waylen 1996: 8). Thus, even though women enter the very public sphere of politics, this division seems to prevail as she is continuously measured according to a set of male norms. This has led to the development of “many myths and stereotypes of women’s political participation” in which they are viewed as being “passive, apolitical and conservative” (Waylen 1996: 10). Some people even think that women are not capable of being corrupt and in an Indian context, there are many hopes that the influx of women into politics will cleanse an area that is considered to be very polluted by corrupt and greedy politicians. In the following section I will transcend this division between the public and the private in regard to local governance politics as the political life of women melt together with the private aspects of their everyday life and their family relations.

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<sup>11</sup> In the Karnataka Human Development Report a Self-Help-Group is defined as “a small (12-20 persons) group of poor people who voluntary come together and address their poverty and other social issues” (ibid: 197). However, most of my main respondents were members of a Self-Help-Group even though not all of them could be characterised as being economically poor, considering the many middleclass consumer goods (such as TV, fridge, gas cooker, motorbike etc) that many of them owned.

<sup>12</sup> View the maps of India and Karnataka in Annex B

## 5.2 Women and the family in India

In India the family plays an important role in regard to women's status, living conditions and autonomy. The division of labour and responsibilities inside the household, as well as women's access to the outside labour market and their physical mobility is largely controlled by the family (SRWK 1998: 27-28). Furthermore, the access of the individual family member to resources such as food or health-care is often controlled by the family and largely depends on the age and gender of the individual member. Thereby, the "family acquires a different meaning according to the individual's gender, age and generational position" (Pernau 2003: 16-17). The generational position does transcend the importance of gender as the mother-in-law often has a higher position within the family hierarchy compared to her newly married daughter-in-law. This is especially evident in joint families where several generations live in the same household.

On the one hand the Indian family is conceived to be a site for gender subordination based on patriarchy and unequal power relations within the family. On the other hand, it is conceived as the site of a kind of support and security that neither the state nor any women's organisations are able to replace.

"It is relatively easier to fight against the State (...). It is harder to fight for one's rights within the family. Women who have done so have invariably faced the bitterest disappointments in their lives as they are systemically isolated and harassed by their family or community members. And women's groups have found themselves unable to give continuing material and emotional support to struggling women (...). In the absence of what should actually be done by the State, the family, ironically, becomes the only institution, which helps distressed women" (Gandhi 1992: 271).

For women who spend most of their lives within the four walls of their household, the family often becomes the most important institution in their lives. At the same time one has to be aware of the regional differences that exist in India in regard to gender relations and women's position within the family. Several scholars speak of the existence of a more 'traditional' patriarchal belt in North India where women have a more subordinate position within the family compared to the more egalitarian family structures in South India where Karnataka is situated (Kabeer in Rai 2006: 236).<sup>13</sup> Just as the family plays an important role in connection with women's access to

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<sup>13</sup> Measured on the Human and Gender Development Index (measured according to life expectancy, education and GDP), Karnataka is one of the more developed states in India. The southern part of the state is, however, much more developed than the northern part. (HDR 2005: 12)



the labour market, it also plays a role in terms of their access to and participation in politics, which will be discussed in the following section.

### 5.3 The political family and the notion of proxy

Many South Asian countries have been governed by female prime ministers, of which most of them come from so-called *political families* that continually foster new generations of politicians. In an Indian context the Nehru-Gandhi family is the ultimate example of a political family with several powerful female leaders such as Indira Gandhi and her daughter-in-law Sonia Gandhi. It has been argued that the high position of these women is mostly due to their famous husbands and fathers and not so much the result of their own achievements (Mahbub Ul Haq 2000: 147).<sup>14</sup>

The phenomenon of the political family also exists on a more local political level within the Panchayat system as many both female and male candidates come from families where one or more members still participate or used to participate in politics. In a survey conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences in connection with the 1995 by-elections in Karnataka, 24,5% of the elected members to the level of Gram Panchayat had family members who had previous political experience (Subha 1995: 67).<sup>15</sup>

The concept of *proxy*<sup>16</sup> is often used in the discussion of women's political participation in the Panchayats. In an account on female representatives in a municipal corporation in Maharashtra, Nanidevkar defines a *proxy* as someone who has a low level of awareness and experience with politics as well as someone who is to some degree forced into politics by the family in order to maintain the constituency of another relative in order to keep the political power within the family.

"The proxies owe their primary loyalty to their family. Their role of an elected representative being merely an extension of their role as a housewife." (Nanidevkar 1998: 1815).

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<sup>14</sup> There are similar examples of political families from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan that have fostered several female political leaders. "It is assumed that given the patriarchal attitudes of the majority of the voting electorate, they would rather vote for a man than a woman. Women leaders like Sonia Gandhi of India, Khaleda Zia and Shaikh Hasina of Bangladesh or Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan are considered to be exceptions who have the legacy of their husbands and fathers behind them" ((Mahbub Ul Haq 2000: 147)

"...among the factors which enable women to reach leadership positions are elite status, high levels of female participation in the movements struggling for independence, and crucially important, links to politically prominent male relatives, often accompanied by their martyrdom, e.g. their assassination" (Waylen 1996:12).

<sup>15</sup> This number was somewhat higher in regard to the Block and District level where respectively 39,9% and 53,8% of the elected members had family members with previous political experience (Subha 1995: 67).

<sup>16</sup> In the dictionary, *proxy* stands for "somebody authorized to substitute for someone else."

In relation to female proxies, their role as housewife is then extended from the private sphere of the household to the public sphere of politics. Nanidevakar argues that the fact that many elected women are used as proxies turns the quota system into “another tool for exploitation” which was not the intention of the people behind the legislation. At the same time she underlines that it is not only a problem for women as many men also act as proxies (ibid: 1815-16). However, the concept of proxy is mostly discussed in connection with women’s political participation and not so much in relation to the participation of men.

The specific connection between proxy, the family and elected women is coined in the term *Beti-biwi-bahu*<sup>17</sup> brigade where the daughter, wife and daughter in-law extend their family duties to include participation in the Panchayat on behalf of their husbands, fathers and father-in-laws (Mayaram 2003: 249). They then become what Bryld terms as a ‘de facto’ chairmen or members of the Panchayat who are pulling the strings behind the scenes. In an article on the participation of women and low caste participation in the Panchayats of Kolar district, Karnataka, Bryld argues that the custom of ‘de facto’ chairmen is problematic, as he cannot be made accountable for his actions through the official system. You cannot, for example, file an official ‘no-confidence-motion’ against someone who is not officially elected (Bryld 2001: 163). This kind of proxy relation does not only exist within the realm of the family as a village strongman or leader can also act as a ‘de facto’ chairperson.<sup>18</sup>

B.S Bhargava adds to the discussion of proxy with his term *proxy-corruption* that can be used to describe the relation between elected women and corruption. Due to certain norms in the Indian society, it is usually men who deal with money issues and in the case of corruption it is also the men that receive and give bribes. Even though the woman is not directly receiving or giving bribes, she can still be actively encouraging her husband or other male relatives to do so. Bhargava argues that there has been a development in recent years from a situation where elected women are non-corrupt to a situation where they have become ‘proxy-corrupt.’<sup>19</sup> One can say that the roles are reversed and it is the husband who acts as the proxy for his wife. However, it can often be difficult as an outsider to judge whether or not the husband or

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<sup>17</sup> “Daughter- wife- daughter-in-law” brigade.

<sup>18</sup> During her research in Orissa, Hust discovered that some male villagers would select the female Panchayat members based on whether or not their husbands would support and help them with their duties (Hust 2004: 215). In this way the villagers reinforced a kind of proxy relation between husband and wife.

<sup>19</sup> The concept of proxy-corruption was introduced to me during an interview with Dr BS Bhargava at the Institute of Social Sciences’ office in Bangalore, 03.10.06.

the wife acts as the proxy. The notion does, nevertheless, challenge the view that women are merely passive substitutes for their husbands.

Proxy is not only a descriptive term that is used to describe a specific relation between the family and the woman in connection with her political participation. In an account on women's participation in Rajasthan, Mayaram criticises the term itself for symbolising "a complete denial of the possibilities of women's agency, growth and learning." Contrary to Nanidevakar, Mayaram argues that women's participation in the Panchayats has provided them with a site for learning which is, for example, apparent from the change that has happened with their vocabulary and that the reservation for women thus has a "transformational potential" (Mayaram 2003: 248-252). This site of learning also includes the family.

"While the family is certainly the site of domination, it also needs to be recognised as the major institution providing elected women support and sustenance. It is the most significant school currently available for women's initial political learning" (ibid: 243)

An elected woman may begin her political life as a proxy and then over time develop into a more assertive and independent thinking politician through participation in the Panchayat meetings and training seminars (ibid). That it takes time for these women to develop from the 'ugly' proxy ducklings into beautiful independent swans is a key aspect of this argument. The somewhat ambivalent or double role of the family as both a site for control and a site for learning and protection are also present in the discussion on proxy and the political participation of women.

## **6. Presentation of the political life stories**

### **6.1 Background of the respondents**

Basic background information about the nine main respondents is presented in the chart below. They have all participated in training seminars that was either arranged by the government or by different NGOs.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Election period</b>	<b>Election quota</b>	<b>Position within Gram Panchayat</b>	<b>Marital status/no of children</b>
<b>Geeta</b>	41	Pre-University College	2000-2005	General lady	Former vice-president. Currently working for an NGO.	Married 2 sons
<b>Lalitamma</b>	39	No schooling/illiterate	2005-2010	Scheduled Caste	President	Married 2 sons 1 daughter
<b>Sitamma</b>	36	10 <sup>th</sup> standard/class	2000-2005 2005-2010	General lady	Former president. Currently ordinary member	Married 2 daughters
<b>Nandita</b>	46	Pre-University College	1995-2000 2000-2005	General lady	Former member and president. Currently managing a women's group.	Unmarried, lives with her natal family
<b>Arundhati</b>	26	10 <sup>th</sup> standard	2005-2010	General lady	Ordinary member	Married 2 sons
<b>Rathna</b>	25	10 <sup>th</sup> standard	2005-2010	General lady	Ordinary member	Married 2 daughters 1 son
<b>Devya</b>	36	7 <sup>th</sup> standard	2005-2010	General lady	Ordinary member	Married 1 son 1 daughter
<b>Veena</b>	42	10 <sup>th</sup> standard	2005-2010	General lady	Ordinary member	Married 2 sons
<b>Sunita</b>	36	10 <sup>th</sup> standard	2005-2010	General lady	Ordinary member	Married 1 son 1 daughter

## 6.2 Entry into the Panchayat: a question of encouragement

Everything has a beginning and so is the case with the political life stories of these nine women. When confronted with the question why they had decided to contest the Panchayat election most of them would hesitate and answer that they were interested in doing social work combined with a story of how their family or some people from the village had encouraged them to contest. The following accounts from the interviews with Rathna and Devya show how they entered the Panchayat councils:

*"When I ask Rathna why she had contested, she tells me that her father-in-law had once contested the Panchayat election and lost it and her husband is interested in politics and has good contacts with political leaders. Among them is an MLA whose picture is in a frame in the glass cupboard. She says that it is also a matter of family status that she had contested." (Bangalore South Taluk, 26.10.06)*

*"Devya tells me that her father-in-law has been very active in the Congress Party for nearly 50 years. Personally, she is not interested in politics but she contested because her family wanted her to do so (...) I ask her if she would want to contest for the next election in 2010 and she says that she is personally not interested. When I ask her why, she tells me that she comes from a big family and that her first priority is the family and to take care of the children. That is why she is not interested in politics." (Bangalore South Taluk, 26.10.06)*

In the last case, Devya makes a clear distinction between her personal interest and the interests of her family in terms of her political participation and she does seem to put the interest of the family higher than her own. Both women mention the political interests of their families as the main reason for contesting the election. Viewed from Nanidevakar's definition of a proxy-wife, both Rathna and Devya seem to partly fall into this category in the sense that they began their political careers mainly due to the wishes of their families and thus somehow extended their duties as housewives into the realm of Panchayat politics. Additionally, one can wonder whether or not the women considered this family pressure as something negative or if they viewed it as something that was completely natural to them.

Overall, six of the interviewed women had family members who had previously been elected to the same or a higher level of local government or who had contested without winning the election. None of the women lived in joint families in the sense that they lived under the same roof and shared the same household as their husband's family. However, many of the married women lived in the same village as their in-laws and several kilometres away

from their natal families. In that sense there was a great degree of everyday interaction between the women and their in-laws.

Other respondents had been encouraged to contest the elections by some of the people in their village, which was the case with Geeta and Lalitamma. They themselves explained this encouragement by saying that they had some experience that other rural women might not have. Thus, Geeta was running a small business and both she and Lalitamma had initiated the foundation of a women's group in their respective communities. In an informal conversation with some of the men who had encouraged Geeta to contest I was told that they had supported her because she was a 'capable' woman who was not afraid of speaking her mind. She had also been encouraged to contest by people from the local BJP party and it was a woman from the local branch of the party who in early 2000 had taken her by the hand and brought her to the Panchayat office to register as a contestant just a few minutes before the registration ended. In this connection the villagers may have chosen to encourage women who were known in the community to be engaged in civil society organisations. These women had then already stepped out of the realm of their homes and manifested themselves within the public sphere of the community before they contested the Panchayat elections.

When one compares the studies that are made on the issue of women's political participation in India it is a general phenomenon that women need encouragement in order to contest the elections. In very few cases they enlist themselves on their own initiative (Jacob John 2004). One argument is that they need this encouragement because it is something very new for them to participate in politics.<sup>20</sup> This was, however, not the case with Sitamma who had participated in two Panchayat elections. She had contested and won the first election in early 2000 under the encouragement of her husband and served as a president during half of the mandate period. However, it was the villagers and not her husband who had encouraged her to contest again in the next election in 2005. They had gone to her father-in-law and requested him to ask her to re-contest. She told me that she would not have done so without this encouragement from the villagers. At times even experienced female politicians need this kind of encouragement in order to contest. In this particular case it is interesting to notice that the main motivator changed from a family member to the villagers of her constituency.

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<sup>20</sup> Personal correspondence with ISS Bangalore, 22.12.06

### 6.3 The issue of time

Time and the way it is used is an essential part of everyday life. I have compared the time that the respondents spend on Panchayat related activities with the time that they spend on their daily activities within or outside of the household. In this way it is possible to determine how the women view and prioritise their political work in relation to their other responsibilities.

The responsibilities of an elected member of a Gram Panchayat include attendance at the monthly meeting in the Panchayat office as well as visits to the villages of the ward where she is elected. In addition, a Gram Panchayat president has to visit all the villages of the Panchayat as well as participate in meetings on higher levels within the local governance system. Furthermore, the members as well as the president attend training camps that mostly take place within the same Taluk.<sup>21</sup> This difference in activity level between the president and the ordinary members came forward in the interviews. Thus, the former and present presidents all told me that being a president is fulltime work. An example is the following account from Sitamma:

*"When she was a president she would go to the office early in the morning and stay there until 12-13 o'clock. Sometimes she would run to the Panchayat and only eat when she came back to the house. Then she would also do the household work. Now it is different and she doesn't spend so much time on the Panchayat work. ... Now she will get up at 6-7 am and do the housework. Then she will work on the farm. The Panchayat work is usually later in the day. She says that sometimes her political work will intervene with her personal life as people will come and visit her during the day and then she will have to prepare tea for them. While her husband is in the house she has to take care of him and his needs."*  
(Kolar, 14.10.06).

Lalitamma, the SC president, also had a very busy daily schedule, which meant that she did not have time to do any income-generating activities. As a president she would receive 500 INR a month but she told me that it was not even enough to pay for the transportation to all the meetings that she had to attend. Her husband's income was not enough to feed the family. Thus, her political activities had brought her family into economic difficulties. The two former presidents, Nandita and Sitamma, did not seem to have faced similar economic problems as the one owned a small shop that supported her and her family and the other one was married to a wealthy farmer and lived in a house that was several times the size of Lalitamma's house. Still, Lalitamma seemed to prioritise the work in the Panchayat and her position as president very

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<sup>21</sup> Personal correspondence with ISS Bangalore, 12.12.06.

highly and she would speak with great enthusiasm about her work there. Her husband shared this enthusiasm and talked about the many opportunities that this could bring for the children. At the same time she told me that she was afraid that the villagers would laugh at her and say that she did not perform her duties as president properly if she did not go to the Panchayat office every day, and that she would often think about her children when she was away from them. Thus, her participation was not without consequences for her family life.

The activity level of the ordinary members shifted between those who only attended the monthly meetings at the Panchayat office as well as the different government-sponsored training seminars in the nearby Taluk headquarters and those who would go 2-3 times a week to the office as well as visit the different villages of the ward where they were elected. This difference in activity-level seemed to depend on the level of enthusiasm and involvement with which they spoke about their work and the time and responsibilities that they had within and outside of the household. The stories of Veena and Devya are used to illustrate this difference. They are both ordinary members of their local Panchayat and were elected in 2005:

Veena is a 42-year old woman who has two grown-up sons that both attend a nearby engineering college. She doesn't have any outside occupation and she says that her main responsibility is the housework and her children. The family lives in a house with several rooms and they have the typical middle class amenities such as a refrigerator and a TV-set and a lot of furniture. She goes to the Panchayat office twice a week and visits the villages of her ward almost every day. During the interview she discussed a specific problem regarding ration cards with another male Panchayat member and seemed to be very engaged in the work. She has a good knowledge about the structure and functioning of the local governance system and compared the situation in Karnataka with the one in Kerala. Furthermore, she is engaged with family counselling where she often helps women that are victims of domestic violence.

Devya is 36 and has a 15-year son and a 12-year old daughter that both go to school. She gets up at 6 am in the morning and goes to her small roadside shop where she sells biscuits and snacks. Here she prepares breakfast, lunch and dinner for the family and washes clothes on a stone in front of the shop. At 10 pm she returns to her house and goes to sleep. Devya tells me that she has the financial responsibility for the family as well as the main responsibility for the household and the children. Her husband is a retired police officer. When I ask her about the time that she spends on Panchayat-related work she tells me that it is daily work. Every second day her husband will go to the villages of her ward and does the work there and she will attend the monthly Panchayat meeting and go to the training seminars. When we arrived for the interview, he was overlooking the



construction of a house in the village. Whenever Devya attends a training seminar she has to close her shop, as there is no one to look after it for her.

In Devya's case one can wonder if she would even have time to do the kind of work in the Panchayat that Veena does. Given the fact that she has the financial responsibility for the family, and combined with her low interest in politics, she does not seem to prioritise Panchayat work very highly. Perhaps she does not mind that her husband does half her work.

I also asked the women who would take care of the household and family when they were away at training camps and otherwise busy with their political responsibilities. Some women got help from husbands, children, and relatives and in one case from a servant. However, some women told me that whenever they went to training seminars, they would get up even earlier in the morning to finish the household work. Whenever Geeta went to seminars and meetings and was away from home for several days, she would prepare the food in advance and put it in the fridge even though her husband was able to cook. However, I also noticed how he would take care of the youngest child when Geeta was busy preparing dinner for the family. In general, the husbands seemed more eager to help the women with their Panchayat responsibilities than with the household work.

Thus, the daily routine and the political activities melt together as politics become just another activity in the already overburdened daily routine of the elected women.

## **6.4 Mobility and security**

The above-mentioned responsibilities of a Panchayat member imply that they, on several occasions, have to travel outside the boundaries of their village. This has special implications for women as they often do not have the same possibilities to venture around freely compared to men.<sup>22</sup> In this study, the issue of distance and the mode of transportation to and from the home of the elected representative to the Panchayat office, the village and the Taluk headquarter are important aspects of the notion of mobility.

In those situations where the Panchayat office is close to the home of the respondent, she will usually go there on her own but when it is several kilometres away, the husband will most often take her there. Most of the husbands owned a motorbike that they would use. In the case of Lalitamma,

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<sup>22</sup> "While both men and women face certain restrictions on their freedom of movement by virtue of caste or community, women are confronted with constraints that are particular to their gender" (SRWK 1998: 218).

her husband would escort her to meetings that took place in a new area where none of them had been before. If she had to stay at the Panchayat office until it was very late, her husband or eldest son would come and pick her up. But she told me that she had also travelled alone in the dark. However, it was very few of the women who travelled alone outside of the village or Panchayat boundaries, depending again on the position that they had in the council. Most of the informants told me that the Panchayat meetings took place during the day and not at night, which makes it much easier for women to participate without relying on being escorted by their husbands or other relatives.

In this study it was easier for the women who lived in larger villages to move around by themselves as both the office as well as their wards were close by and the infrastructure is much better; i.e. there is better access to the bus or autos. In areas where the Panchayat consists of many small villages that are scattered over a large area, it is more complicated for women to move about. In two cases the bus did not go directly to the villages, as the roads were too bad. The issue of mobility is especially problematic for the families that do not own a motorbike. Apart from a good and stable income, it is also necessary to own some kind of vehicle to be an elected representative and it is especially important for a president.

Whenever the women went to the Taluk headquarter in order to attend a training seminar or a meeting, their husbands would either escort them or they would go with some other members from their Panchayat.

*"(...) her husband has told her that she should just go with another member to the training sessions and that it doesn't matter if this person is a man or a woman. My interpreter explains to me that in the villages, many men are suspicious of what the wives are doing when they are outside of the house."*  
(Rathna, Bangalore South Taluk, 26.10.06)

The suspicion of the husband was something that Geeta had also experienced. She was the one of my informants who had travelled the most on her own and who had been many times outside of her own district and even the state.

*"She tells me that her husband has recently been very suspicious of her because she is so much away from home. 'The husband may feel threatened', she says 'and wonders if the wife will come back again every time she goes out.'"*  
(Geeta, Kolar, 13.10.06)

According to Hust, who has done an extensive study on women's political participation in Orissa, it is a general phenomenon that many women are afraid of leaving the premises of their house because of the threat of character

assassination where people spread rumours about them behind their backs if they dare to challenge the traditional role of a housewife (Hust 2003: 251). It even affected an otherwise very mobile woman such as Geeta.

Security was an often-discussed issue during my conversations with Geeta. She told me about the strategies that she used in order to avoid any uncomfortable situations on the bus, especially when she returned from work at 9 pm at night. During our field visits I experienced these strategies myself:

*“On the bus from Kolar to Geeta’s place, we sit below a TV screen that is showing a violent Telugu movie (...). She tells me that it makes some women feel uneasy that they show these movies as men can get ‘good’ ideas from them and maybe try to do something. She mentions an episode when she was on her way home on the bus one night. A man who was sitting behind her touched her shoulder several times. She did not keep quiet but stood up and yelled at him. However, a young woman who was sitting next to her did not say anything. The ticket seller also yelled at the man who looked down in embarrassment. She tells me that she often sits in the front of the bus and talks to the driver. In that way she feels more secure as she expects that he will protect her if someone harasses her.” (Kolar, 13.10.06)*

In matters of mobility women can often end up in a dilemma. On the one hand they depend on their husbands to escort them to different places, which gives them a sense of security but also makes them dependable on this help. On the other hand, women who have a high degree of freedom to move about on their own also feel insecure and take a lot of precautions in order to reach home safely just like Geeta.<sup>23</sup>

However, mobility is not only about distance and modes of transportation. It can also include the possibility of elected men and women to interact freely without being the victims of character assassination. Traditionally men have discussed politics with each other at the village teashop or other public places where women rarely come and discuss with them.

“(Female representatives) are also not seen in other places of debate and political discussions, like the *chai* shops and the bazaar. One reason for women’s absence there is the presence of male villagers with whom the women have a fictional family-relationship. And this fictional relationship prohibits social intercourse with those men.” (Hust: 251)

The question is then under which circumstances- apart from the Panchayat office and the training seminars- that elected men and women can interact and discuss politics. In two cases I experienced how this kind of interaction

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<sup>23</sup> “Physical mobility, although a vital parameter of status, is unfortunately a double-edged sword, since most societies seem to have little respect for women’s bodily integrity. Free mobility makes women vulnerable to assault, molestation and rape.” (SRWK 1998: 39).

took place in the private realm of the elected woman's home. In the first case, a group of influential men came to visit Geeta, and after which she told me that it would not have been appropriate for her to have this visit unless I was there. During an interview with Veena, a male member came to visit her and they began a long discussion of a particular problem in the Panchayat and I wondered if he would have visited her if she had been alone. Whether or not a woman is restricted and cannot meet a fellow male Panchayat member may depend on the view of the husband as the case was with Rathna's husband and it may depend on how concerned the woman is with the risk of character assassination.<sup>24</sup> Women's mobility does to a large extent depend on the husband both in regard to transportation and the persons that he will allow her to interact with.

## 6.5 Support

The husband was the most frequently mentioned family member in the interviews and when asked about who they thought were their main support the majority of the elected women mentioned their husbands. The fact that many of the husbands were present during the interview may have been one factor behind this answer. However, they were also frequently mentioned in those interviews that were conducted without their presence. Apart from the initial encouragement to contest several women mentioned that they would also get advice from their husbands in particular matters. Arundathi explained that her husband had taught her how she should talk to people and also about the problems of the village. He had also been the mastermind behind a drainage project that was to be implemented in the Panchayat. Several of the elected women would thus share the responsibilities of an elected member with their husband just as the case was with Devya, whose husband would do all the work in the villages that did not require her presence. This was considered to be quite legitimate even by the interpreter.

In connection with another fieldwork conducted in Karnataka, Aziz seeks to understand the phenomenon of proxy and why so many male relatives "shadow women members and presidents" and got the following explanation:

"(S)ince the women are illiterate, elected for the first time and by reason of which are inexperienced they needed help and support from the close

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<sup>24</sup> Another aspect of the discussion of security does not deal with public transportation and the ability to move around freely but with the physical security of elected women. Geeta told me a story of a woman in Tumkur District who had been killed because she had connected a water tap in a particular place that some people didn't like. A vice-president in Bangalore Rural District was brutally killed just a few days before I began my fieldwork, which made me consider the security for elected men and women. Geeta told me that things like that happen very sudden and almost out of the blue.

confidants. Husbands and relatives also feel compelled to be always on the side of the women members especially with the women president because if the latter made a mistake or conspired to make a mistake it will be reflected on the family honour. Hence the relatives of the woman president in particular keep company just in case she needs any help.” (Aziz 2001: 128-129).

Aziz finds it quite legitimate that the women receive help and advice from their male relatives who may be more experienced in the world of politics (Ibid: 129). What some scholars may view as a proxy relation where the husband (or male relative) acts as the ‘de facto’ member or chairperson, the husbands may view as a necessary help. Formally the Panchayat work is the concern of one person, i.e. the elected representative, but in reality it affects and involves the entire family.

One former president told me that the other members of her Panchayat had filed a ‘no-confidence-motion’ against her during her time as president and that she would never have been able to go through this process without the help of her husband. My interpreter, who knew the respondent well, told me after the interview that the husband of the respondent had used the political position of his wife to receive bribes which was the real reason behind the ‘no-confidence-motion.’ On the one hand the story is an example of the accountability problem that can arise when the elected woman is punished for the actions of her husband who has acted as a ‘de facto’ chairman. On the other hand, it is difficult to know how involved the woman actually was in the corrupt activities of her husband and if it was in fact a case of proxy-corruption.

In general the husbands of my informants showed a great degree of enthusiasm concerning the political participation of their wives such as the case was with the husband of Lalitamma:

*“He tells me that he is very happy about her participation. First of all, because it is now possible for her to help other people and secondly, because it is a blessing for the children as he believes that her participation will affect them and their future in a positive way.” (Kolar, 13.10.06)<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Lalitamma’s husband told my interpreter Geeta that he was very happy about all the things that she had done for his wife in terms of helping and guiding her in her work as Panchayat president. As all of my interpreters worked for NGOs I had the opportunity to see the interaction not only between the interpreter and the elected women but also between the interpreter and the husbands. It gave me a strong impression of how important it was to create a relation of trust with the husbands, which may make it easier for the elected women to attend NGO training camps and receive advice from the NGO staff. In another case the interpreter very politely asked the husband to let his wife answer my questions, as he was all the time trying to do it. As such I got the impression that it takes a lot of negotiation and diplomacy to interact with the husbands.

It came as a surprise to meet all these enthusiastic husbands, as I had expected that at least some of them would not approve of or support their wives' political activities. However, one can imagine that there is a connection between the initial encouragement of the husband and the subsequent support that he gives her when the political work becomes a part of the daily routine.

Devya's husband shared this enthusiasm to a certain degree but found that some elected women misused the freedom of being in the Panchayat council by turning their back on the family and family responsibilities. He argued that it was after all the family that had made sure that they were elected and thus underlined the huge impact that some families have on the political participation of women. His wife did not have this problem as she clearly prioritised her work in her shop and in the family much higher than her responsibilities in the Panchayat.<sup>26</sup>

The husbands were not the only people to support the women in their political work. Throughout the fieldwork, different relations between women were described to me, which can be divided into 1) the relation between the elected women and 2) the relation between elected women and the women of their Self-Help-Groups. The relation between elected women seemed to be dominated by a transfer of knowledge from the more experienced women to the less experienced ones. Geeta, who was a former member of a Panchayat and was presently working for an NGO that trained women, clearly used her previous experience in the Panchayat system in her current work for the NGO, which was especially evident in her relation with the SC president, Lalitamma.

*"Geeta tells me that she is actively training Lalitamma so she will become a stronger leader. She says that she often uses her as a role model in training sessions so other women can see what an illiterate but otherwise determined woman is capable of." (Kolar, 13.10.06).<sup>27</sup>*

The former president Sitamma was training the current female president of her own Panchayat:

*"The current president is also a woman and Sitamma thinks that she is not capable of asking questions. She is teaching her about her role and responsibilities (...). I ask her why she is teaching the new president and she says that they are in the same place and need to cooperate." (Kolar, 14.10.06).*

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<sup>26</sup> One of the 'village elders' from Geeta's community told me that most elected women were able to balance between the work in the Panchayat and their responsibilities in the family, which was very important. He was convinced that if a woman turns her back on her family, it would be ruined.

<sup>27</sup> I had the possibility to attend two seminars where Geeta had invited Lalitamma to hold a speech about her work as a Panchayat president. The first time was at a teaching day about women's political participation held at an all women's college in Bangalore and the second time was at a training seminar in the Taluk head quarter of Mulbagal in Kolar district.

Most of the elected women were members of the local *Stree Shakti*, Self-Help-Group, from which they would also receive some support for their political activities. I was told that during election time some of the women from the *Stree Shakti* would help the elected women with her campaign and by telling her openly that they would vote for her. A female neighbour to Sunita, who was present during the interview, told me that they would sometimes discuss matters related to the community at their *Stree Shakti* meetings but they had never talked about family related issues in that forum. Even though the elected women receive support from outside the family, many of them still consider their husbands as the most important source of support.

## 6.6 Political aspirations

The respondents were asked if they would want to contest for the next Panchayat election in 2010. Their answers were very different, as some women wanted to contest again but predicted that they would face some problems while other women did not want to contest again due to different reasons.

Nandita told me that she would have wanted to contest for a third time if she had had the money to do so. In general the issue of money was mentioned several times during the interviews. Thus, I was told that a prospective politician needs money not only to pay for the small pamphlet with the name and symbol of the contestant which is distributed to the people of the specific ward where one contests but also to buy alcohol and food items for the same people in order to get their votes. According to Hust, “(...) offering cash and kind in order to get elected is not really seen as corruption or as a condemnable act”, as the electorate considers it to be a part of “the way politics work” (Hust 2004: 195). An interesting argument but a practise that my informants did not seem to like, as it constituted a hindrance to their future participation in the Panchayats.

The rotation system, where the number and type of the reserved seats are changed with every election, was another reason why some women told me that they would not re-contest. Sunita told me that her Gram Panchayat would become a part of the municipal corporation of Greater Bangalore for the next election,<sup>28</sup> which in her view meant that the members needed to be

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<sup>28</sup> The constituencies of the Panchayat system are rapidly changing in Bangalore Urban district. Bangalore City is expanding so fast that there are plans to incorporate 111 villages originally belonging to 60 rural Gram Panchayats into a municipal corporation that will be named 'Greater

more educated and have more money than she had. Thus, she did not consider her own experience of participating in the Panchayat as enough for her to re-contest. Arundhati did not want to contest again as she had been attacked verbally several times by angry villagers who were dissatisfied with their ration cards.<sup>29</sup> In those situations she would usually not respond but just go home and feel bad. Lalitamma had been encouraged by her political party to contest for a higher level within the local governance system but she had many doubts about that:

*"She says that the Grama Panchayat is a limited body and she knows how to command it and get the work done. At Zilla and Taluk level there are so many Panchayat members and the officials there know how to tackle women. They just do some sweet-talking to make the women shut up."* (Kolar, 13.10.06)

I also asked the ordinary members if they would want to become a Panchayat president one day. Some of them told me that they would like that if they got the opportunity and if the right quota seat was there. Overall they seemed to think that both re-contesting, being re-elected or becoming a Panchayat president was something that they were not able to decide by themselves as it was outside of their personal control and at times even outside the control of their family. Thus, money as well as the structure of the local governance system had a strong impact on the political aspirations of the women. In that sense they seemed to have a very practical view on their political future. Apart from Devya, who said that she did not want to re-contest because of her family obligations, the women did not mention their family as a reason (or excuse) for not contesting again. Compared to the major role that the family played in terms of their entry into the political system, it plays a surprisingly small role in terms of their political aspirations.

Several women told me that their experiences as elected representatives with all that it entailed of travelling and participating in meetings and training seminars had meant a lot to them, and their view on themselves and the lives of other people had changed. The statements of Rathna and Sitamma were especially interesting since both had initially entered the Panchayat due to the wishes of their families:

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Bangalore' (Deccan Herald: 04.11.06). The system of governance will then change. The Gram Panchayat of both Sunita and Veena is likely to become a part of this municipal system in 2010.

<sup>29</sup> The Panchayat members are responsible for the distribution of ration cards, that can be used to buy food and other supplies at low rates, to the poor people of the community. In Arundhati's village there was two kinds of ration cards; one for the people below and one for the people above the poverty line. However, some villagers above the poverty line were dissatisfied with their cards and wanted a card for people below the line. It is certainly not easy to satisfy everybody!



*"She feels that she has become more courageous since she entered the Panchayat. Before she did not go anywhere and now she feels that she can go everywhere. Before she was too shy to talk to people and now she speaks with the villagers also about other things that are not related to Gram Panchayat politics." (Rathna, Bangalore South Taluk, 26.10.06)*

*"She says that she receives more respect from being in the Panchayat and she feels happy about it. Officials give her preference. When a child is born in the village, she is called to give praise to it. She says that a Panchayat member is like a mother. When someone is born or die, she will come to their house." (Sitamma, Kolar, 14.10.06).*

Viewed from the point of view of Mayaram, one can say that Rathna and Sitamma's experience shows the 'transformational potential' of the reservation system while the case of Devya shows that this potential does not cover all elected women.

## **7. Conclusion**

### **7.1 Discussion**

The importance of the family in relation to women's political participation differs from woman to woman. The family may play an important role in terms of her initial entry into the Panchayat system as well as in relation to the practical matters that affect her everyday political participation in terms of mobility and helping out with her household chores. However, in terms of her political aspirations the wishes of the family do not seem to dominate.

Devya may fall into the category of a 'proxy' wife but she has no wish to continue for another election period. Thus, it may take more than being a proxy wife to contest a second election. Just as the importance of the family is very situational so is the proxy relation, understood in the descriptive sense. I would argue that it is quite seldom that a woman is a 100% proxy wife with no ideas or initiatives of her own. She may need to be encouraged to go into politics but that does not mean that she is a proxy. In that case, the majority of women who enter the Panchayat councils would be proxies as all the people who have encouraged them to do so could have their own hidden agendas. What some scholars may understand as a case of proxy, the persons included in this relationship may view as a quite legitimate situation where husband and wife share the responsibilities of the Panchayat work, as was expressed by

Arundhati and Devya. Clearly the quota system attracts different kinds of women of which some may remain proxies throughout their election period. However, that does not exclude the fact that they are learning from the experience of participating in politics. In that sense I relate more to the arguments of Mayaram than of Nanidevakar.

There is no doubt, however, that some proxy relations can undermine both the political system and the empowering aim behind the women's quotas as both Nanidevakar and Bryld argues. In this respect it is relevant to discuss *when* the legitimate and for many women quite invaluable support of the family ends and the more illegitimate proxy relation begins. Furthermore, how can you use the support of the family in a way that it does not challenge the legitimacy of the political system and, most importantly, becomes a serious problem for the elected woman.

In many instances the family constitutes an important site for learning in correlation with the official training programmes that are conducted by the government and the NGOs. Even though the women receive support in their political activities from different sides, the family constitutes a very important site for learning, support and protection and it may be difficult for any other instances to fully replace it.

## **7.2 Concluding remarks**

The nine women, who are the main characters of this thesis, have almost all entered politics through the encouragement of other people, and the family is to a large extent their main support in the everyday political participation of these women. However, they differ in the way they have developed while being in politics. Some women have blossomed and found great interest in the development work of the Panchayat. Others dislike the Panchayat work and prioritise other aspects of their lives over political work.

The everyday life of women in terms of time and mobility has made their political participation difficult. At the same time, their families have provided them with a kind of support that has been very helpful to them, especially during the first years of the election period. Over time the dependency of the women on their family and especially the husbands may decrease. Conversely, the political participation of the women has affected their everyday life by opening up a whole new world of possibilities that some women have seized.

### **7.3 Postscript**

A woman from an NGO told me that several elected women had encouraged the staff to hold special training seminars for their husbands in which they were informed about women's rights. The women often found it difficult to convince their husbands about these rights on their own and needed some extra help to do it. The NGO had not yet held such a course. However, it would be a very good idea, especially if it includes some training in how the husbands can support their wives' political activities in the best possible way without taking over her work entirely. It is difficult to completely change the gender relations within the family from one day to the other. The best thing is then to recognise the importance of especially the husband by involving him in a training context where he can also be informed about the negative sides of proxy relations. In that way the two-sided family will turn into a place of support rather than a place of control. After all, women should not be alone with the responsibility of improving the political culture of India. They already have enough to do.

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### *Scholars*

Dr. Mohanty: Institute of Social Sciences, interview conducted on 11.09.06 and 21.09.06

Dr. Baviskar: Institute of Social Sciences, Delhi, interview conducted on the 12.09.06

Dr. Jacob John: Institute of Social Sciences, Delhi, interview conducted on the 21.09.06

Dr. Bhargava and Dr. Subha: (Institute of Social Sciences, Bangalore), interview with Dr Bhargava on 05.10, email correspondence with both on 12.12.06 and 22.12.06

Evelin Hust: (Director of Max Müller Bhavan, Bangalore), interview/conversation on 07.11.06

### *Respondents*

Geeta:	Kolar District, from 12.- 16.10.06
Lalitamma:	Kolar District, 13.10.06
Sitamma:	Kolar District, 14.10.06
Nandita:	Bangalore North Taluk, 25.10.06
Arundhati:	Bangalore North Taluk, 25.10.06
Rathna:	Bangalore South Taluk, 26.10.06
Devya:	Bangalore South Taluk, 26.10.06
Veena:	Bangalore North Taluk, 27.10.06
Sunita:	Bangalore North Taluk, 27.10.06

## Interview guide

- When did you get elected to the Gram Panchayat council?
- Why did you contest the election?
- What were your expectations before you entered the Gram Panchayat council?

- Which issues do you find important to deal with in the Panchayat?
- Which issues have you been involved with so far?
- What do you want to do in five years? In terms of political participation and personal aspirations? Do you want to stand for the next election in 2010?

- How much time do you spend on Panchayat work in a week?
- How many times do you go to the Panchayat office in a week?
- Do you usually attend all meetings? If not, why?
- How far is the Panchayat office from your home?
- How do you go to the office- by walking or bus?
- Does anybody escort you to the office or to meetings within or outside of the district? If yes, who usually escorts you?

- Tell me what you do in a day from you wake up in the morning and until you go to bed at night.

- What are your main responsibilities in the household?
- Do you have any occupation outside the household?
- What does your family think of your political participation? (Your husband, in-laws, parents, children etc)

- What does the other women of your village think of your political participation?

- Have you attended any training camps for elected women representatives? If yes, were you able to use some of the training in your political work?

- Are you at present a member of a Self Help Group? If yes, do they give you any support in your political work?

- Who takes care of the family (household chores, children etc) when you are away at Panchayat meetings or training camps? Do you get any help in these chores from other family members?

- On what grounds do you make decisions in the Panchayat council? Do you ask anybody for advice?

- Do you like to be in the Panchayat council?

- Would you recommend it to other women to participate in the Panchayat? Why/why not?

- Do you find a difference in the issues that elected men and women find important?
- Do you find a difference in the behaviour of elected men and women?
- Where do you get the main support for your work in the Panchayat council?
- How should a good Panchayat leader behave?
- Have you experienced any change in your involvement in important decisions within the family since you have been in the Panchayat?
- Background information: age, education, number of members of the household, number and age of children.



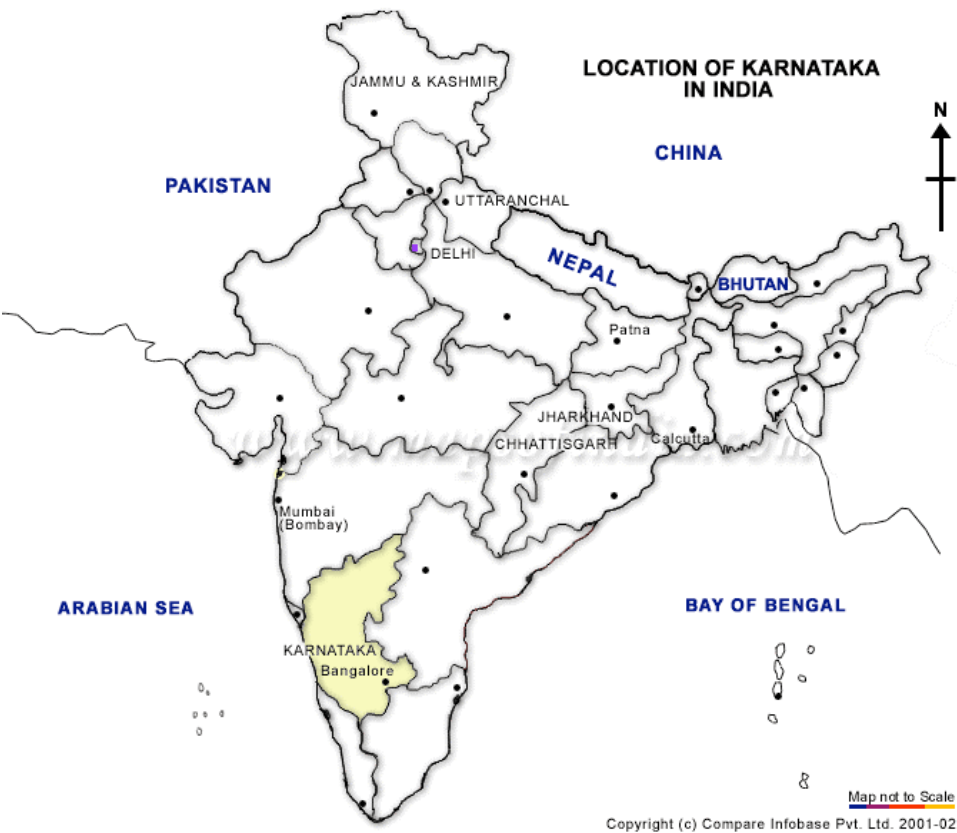
# Annex A

## The Panchayati Raj system in Karnataka

Level	Political council	No of councils	No of elected women (total nr)
District	<div>Zilla Panchayat</div>	27	335 (919)
	↓		
Sub regional/ block	<div>Taluk Panchayat</div>	176	1343 (3340)
	↓		
Local (Between 2-15 villages)	<div>Grama Panchayat</div>	5653	35305 (80627)

Sources: (Bryld 2000: 46), Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department, Human Development Report 2005 (measured in 2000)

Annex B



Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

# KARNATAKA (District Map)

