

women in grassroots governance

Crossing the Limits

An introduction to

Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan,

a state collective promoting women's participation in decision making processes

in Maharashtra

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**“ “ Women who do not behave themselves
are accused of ‘crossing the limits’.
But when women realise who they are
and dare to
express themselves they consciously
cross these limits. ” ”**

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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foreword

Indian democracy was radically transformed in December 1992 through the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, which provide a constitutional mandate to the basic principles of local self-governance. These amendments have had a far reaching impact on the nature of Indian State, governance and peoples' participation in politics. For the first time in post-colonial India, formal spaces for direct participation of people in governance were created and institutionalized in the form of Gram Sabhas. Slowly but steadily, this highly ambitious project of democratic decentralization is altering the basic grammar and architecture of Indian politics. The most significant aspect of this process of democratization is the guaranteed political participation of women in governance through reservation of one-third seats for women in institutions of local self-governance.

The experience of the last 15 years strongly tells us that the provision for reserving seats for women in institutions of local self-governance has proved to be defining and historic. Sceptics might emphasize the failure of the policy of reservation for women in governance by highlighting the phenomenon of *Sarpanch Pati*; nevertheless, this is only a partial reality. The dominant reality is of a 'silent revolution' taking shape for democratizing grassroots governance. Crucially, women are at the forefront of this revolution. Convention wisdom and norms of politics rooted in feudal and hierarchical ethos are being directly challenged and broken. Most importantly, this revolution is using political participation as a potent tool for empowerment of women and directly challenging patriarchy.

This process of strengthening women's participation in grassroots governance and public sphere has been arduous and demanding. Notwithstanding the obstacles created by reactionary and patriarchal forces, several women's initiatives have emerged as a response to the high potential spaces for political participation provided by the local self-government Acts. These initiatives are highly diverse, plural and varied depending on the context and environment. However, they are all working towards the common objective of women's empowerment through strengthening women's participation in grassroots governance.

One such fascinating and inspiring initiative is the *Mahila Rajsatta Andolan (MRA)*. MRA over the past eight years has been working 'brick by brick' for strengthening women's political participation in grassroots governance. This has been a hard battle for MRA. This book *Women in grassroots governance - Crossing the Limits* is an attempt to understand the processes, challenges and achievements of MRA from the perspective of people centred advocacy.

In solidarity,

Amitabh Behar

introduction

This document traces the journey of the Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan (MRA), a collective working to promote and strengthen women's role in governance in Maharashtra. Launched as an initiative by networks of NGOs across the state in March 2000, MRA now has elected women and other grassroots women leaders at the forefront. Over the years, MRA has emerged as a movement that facilitates women's effective participation in local decision-making processes and involves elected women, self-help groups, mahila mandals and non-government organisations (NGOs) and community building organisations (CBOs) as its key actors.

MRA has remained vibrant, both at the action as well as advocacy levels, and has motivated a number of grassroots women to take politics seriously. This document attempts to present a comprehensive picture of programmes, campaigns, and advocacy issues taken up by MRA, and its underlying vision and philosophy.

The significance of MRA's work needs to be understood against the wider background of the passing of the 73rd Amendment in 1993, and the efforts that followed to use the potential of this significant Act to strengthen grassroots governance in general, and women's participation in decision-making bodies in particular. This background is presented in the next chapter and covers major points related to the need for quotas and the overall scenario in Maharashtra after the new Panchayat Raj Act was introduced, with specific focus on women's participation.

The chapter after that describes the inception of MRA at a rural women's convention in Saigata village in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, and the post-convention actions that shaped the movement called the Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan. This section also presents the vision and thrust areas of MRA.

Subsequent chapters introduce MRA in action. For convenience of presentation, MRA initiatives are broadly divided into Grassroots Action, State Level Action and Process of Organisation-building, though obviously, they are all interlinked. These sections also discuss some of the innovative strategies adopted by MRA to fulfill its objectives and to meet various challenges. Grassroots action mainly presents awareness-creation activities and issue-based campaigns as well as experiences and challenges faced by women as contestants and elected representatives. The section on organisation-building describes the progress of MRA from village to state level and a special initiative, Panchayat Mahila Aaghadi, which is a forum of elected women's representatives. The section on state level action gives an overview of state-level programmes, such as state conventions, information dissemination and publications, policy and media advocacy, alliance building and present-day structure of MRA responsible for overall co-ordination of all these programmes.

The major achievements of MRA's work are presented in the chapter titled 'Impact'. The concluding chapter presents the way ahead as chalked out by MRA actors in order to consolidate gains and to meet challenges.

It is a difficult task to introduce a dynamic and ever-evolving process like MRA. Still, the attempt has been made to give an overview of the major events and other aspects integral to MRA's work. The emphasis is on the important role played by this collective in highlighting and supporting the struggles of women in governance and creating a platform for them.

1

Background

The Indian Constitution guarantees equality to all human beings irrespective of their caste, class, sex, ethnicity, and so on. Gender equality is an integral component of the principles of governance stated in the Constitution. Despite this, participation of women in political processes is far from adequate. Therefore, the issue of women's representation, or provision of special quota for them, has been raised frequently ever since the country won independence from colonial rule.

The recommended participation of women in local government in India can be traced back to the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee report (1957). The report recommended that besides the 20 members of the intermediary local government body, there should be two women who are interested in "work among women and children" as co-opted members. The report also suggested a similar provision with regard to the village-level body. Accordingly, a few states, including Maharashtra, made provisions for women's representations. Following this, the Maharashtra Zilla Parishad (district body) & Panchayat Act of 1961, provided for nomination of one or two women to each of the three local self-governing bodies, in case no women were elected. As it happened, out of a total of 320 women representatives of Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads in Maharashtra, in 1978, only six were elected members. As happened in many parts of India, women were mostly recruited into Panchayat Raj Institutions in Maharashtra by co-option rather than through election.

The provision of reservations for women in political decision-making was also one of the major recommendations in the 'Report on the Status of Women in India' published in the 1980s. The report highlighted the declining number of women in the country's electoral processes and expressed serious concern over the marginalisation of women in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This, once again, triggered a debate about the reservation of seats for women in local self-governing institutions. Unfortunately, the government shelved this report and nothing was done about its recommendations. In 1988, the National Perspective Plan chalked out by the government recommended a 30% quota for women in Gram

Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad.

Policy back-up

The 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill was introduced in Parliament in 1989, and it provided for 30% reservation for women in local self government. But it could not be passed and was defeated by a narrow margin in the Upper House. It was reintroduced in September 1991, as the 72nd & 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bills with the additional provision of one-third representation for women in chairperson positions. These Bills were finally passed in December 1992. Ratified by half the states by April 1993, they came into operation as the 73rd & 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India on April 24, 1993.

The salient provisions of the amendments are:

1. Not less than one-third of the seats will be reserved for women (including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) and these may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies or wards of the local government bodies.
2. In proportion to the total population of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ ST) to the population of the area, seats will be reserved for SCs/ STs. There would be reservation for women in the seats allotted to SCs and STs to the extent of not less than one-third of the total SC/ST seats.
3. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats for the offices of the Chairpersons at each level would be reserved for women. This would be rotated among different local government bodies at each election.
4. In addition, women can take advantage of the general seats for members and Chairpersons for open posts at all the levels.

These provisions, that assured a quota for women, paved the way for more than one million women to be part of decision-making processes in local self-government.

Issues concerning elected women

Experiences of actual implementation of the enactment of one-third reservations for women in the last 14 years are mixed. On the positive side, there is a marked change in the outlook of rural women towards political participation. Women, who entered Gram Panchayats and other tiers in the first tenure, viewed it as an imposed ordeal and most of them couldn't wait for their five-year term to get over. This scenario has changed miraculously. Now women are generally keen to take up this new role and are also better prepared to contest elections. Women are not only willing to enter institutions of political governance, but they also aspire to continue to be there and to contest at higher levels of government. Thus the

experience of undergoing three election terms has certainly changed the way women perceive politics and quotas meant for them. There are no authentic statistics, but trends show that women are also contesting open seats. Therefore, in some states such as Karnataka and Maharashtra, their representation has exceeded the mandatory one-third seats. Recently, the state governments of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar increased the quota for women from 33% to 50% in panchayati raj institutions (PRIs). This shows that women's contribution in governance is being recognised and encouraged as part of the political agenda. Drawing from all these apparent trends one may conclude that there is better political awareness among women and more willingness to participate in political processes.

Despite this, there are still many impediments to women's active and effective participation in the political mainstream. The overall approach of men and local political leaders has changed to the extent that they realise that reservations are here to stay. However, general acceptance of the provision of reservation does not mean that women in decision-making roles enjoy better social acceptance, political authority and support to fulfil their role. For women, getting elected is not so difficult now, but making a dent in the functioning and the processes of decision-making is still an uphill task.

Women have been co-opted to meet the formal requirement of women's representation, or in some instances, men stand proxy for women who are usually busy with household chores. There is also lack of awareness among women about the basic functioning of a panchayat, which restricts a large number of elected women from playing a meaningful role. Similarly, only one-third representation in the male-dominated panchayats deters women from having an effective say in their functioning. For a large majority of women, household responsibilities are still a priority and politics is only on the periphery. The fact that women have a long history of subservience and silent suffering prevents them from claiming their rights, expressing their views, and asserting possible solutions to problems. The experience of working with women in governance has underlined the need to address all these issues and empower women to overcome these conventional barriers. Support in terms of information, training and organisation-building, is still very critical to women entering local governments.

Another area of concern is political values. It would be too simplistic to assume that women would essentially be clean and fair when in power. The fact that an increasing number of women are keen to enter decision-making bodies does not necessarily mean that they will automatically protect the interests of women. In order to enable them to address these issues, women leaders must have an understanding of gender issues and gendered power relations. Lack of a social and gender perspective may lead elected women to fall into the same power politics trap that their male counterparts are caught in.

Social interventions

Experience so far has shown that the law in itself is not enough to ensure women's effective participation in political processes. Rather, an enabling environment for women to work and to build their capacities to grapple with their new role is equally essential for the law to benefit women in a real sense. A number of voluntary organisations have played an important role by disseminating information, creating awareness and motivation among elected women and also providing them need-based support. These multifarious efforts in making women politically active and encouraging them to take maximum advantage of the opportunity of political decision-making has shown encouraging results. There are instances of women-headed gram panchayats that have done exceedingly well. Women members' role in tackling issues related to water and sanitation, violence against women etc, has been widely discussed as success stories all over the country. Women have shown a keen desire and energy for working on issues hampering their growth.

These efforts also show that affirmative policies, like a special quota, can be best implemented when women have some kind of support mechanism. Such support may come from an organisation, a local women's collective like self-help groups (SHGs), a movement, or a political party.

A review of various need-based interventions and support activities in the initial years shows that they primarily focused on information dissemination, capacity building of elected women representatives and perspective building of women on gender/caste issues. These efforts focused too much on elected women and left out the political awakening of women who do not take direct part in decision-making bodies. Similarly, a number of studies done in this period highlighted the problems, needs and perceptions of elected women. Till almost 2000 there were few attempts to actually mobilise elected women, back their ground-level struggles and to address, in a systematic manner, critical problems they faced as women/backward caste women. Though these needs were realised and recognised, they were not emphasised much.

Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan was launched at a time when the need to go beyond knowledge and capacity building efforts was becoming clearer. In a way the Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan filled this void and initiated strong field-level activities from the very beginning. Since then, it has systematically and collectively worked towards making women's political participation, particularly at the village level, more visible, more vocal and more effective. MRA has striven to address several critical issues at the ground level as well as at the policy level and has emerged as a positive force.

It is important to know MRA's work experience as it offers a number of lessons and insights to all those who are working with similar intent.

2

Launching of Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan

A convention of rural women in March 2000, held at a remote village named Saigata in Chandrapur district in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, marked the formal beginning of the Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan. The idea of such a convention had originated a year earlier with a year-long review and brainstorming process carried out with various regional networks initiated by Resource and Support Center for Development (RSCD).

RSCD started work in 1993 in two states, Maharashtra and Rajasthan, and promoted networking as a strategy to initiate focused and collective interventions for facilitating pro-people development initiatives. Within a span of two years, five regional networks, one each in Western Maharashtra, Konkan, Marathwada, Vidarbha and Northern Maharashtra, involving over 175 voluntary organisations were formed in the state. These networks were engaged in development issues specific to their region, though gender justice was a common concern for all.

During 1998-99, RSCD Collective (RSCD, 5 regional networks- Janapath Vikas Manch, Konkan Vikas Samanvay Vyaspeeth, Marathwada Lokvikas Manch, Vidarbha Lokvikas Manch and Uttar Maharashtra Lokvikas Manch - and other associate partners) carried out a review of their own work to gauge its impact and to plan a future strategy of work. What emerged from this review process was the idea of convergence of efforts at the state level on a common concern. Subsequently, a consultative process with the network partners identified 'Women and Panchayat Raj' as the area to focus on at the state level as a collective. Thus in 2000, RSCD Collective decided to launch a state-level process to promote and strengthen women's governance in development processes and it was the convention of rural women in Saigata on March 11-12, 2000 that started the process. It was a first of its kind gathering in Maharashtra. Since this collective endeavour was kick-started with support from a state-wide network of voluntary organisations, it had participants from over 900 villages across the state.

Saigata Convention

Saigata, a tiny village in Chandrapur district, is surrounded by thick forests that were restored by watchful villagers. A few years ago, the villagers formed a forest protection committee and took a vow not to cut trees for fuel or to sell as timber. Women were in the forefront in making this commitment and abiding by it. This proven ability of the Saigata villagers to work in a collective spirit made it the right place to have such a gathering of women.

The Saigata convention was an eagerly awaited opportunity for the 3000 participants - all rural women, including elected women representatives (EWRs), self-help group (SHG) members, mahila mandal members etc. The convention was inaugurated in a unique way: all the delegates joined hands and took a collective pledge to promote the active and effective participation of women in local government.

In the various sessions, women shared their experiences and the problems they faced as women representatives. They spoke openly about issues that bothered them: the problems encountered during elections, the resistance of the local leadership, the lack of support from family members, barriers to their active participation such as lack of information and mobility and the prevailing hostility that often resulted in their peripheral participation. Open interviews and narrations of elected women also showed their naïveté towards political processes and how they were grappling with new responsibilities all by themselves. Equally evident was the women's willingness to struggle for their rightful share by overcoming personal and social barriers. Several sessions in the convention led to an understanding of the causes of women's subordination.

In Saigata women came:

- *To launch a campaign for women's active participation in local governance*
- *To assert their right over natural resources, human development resources, village development*
- *To assert their political participation in the village governance system*
- *To assert their rights as equal partners in the developmental process that is denied to them in the patriarchal power structure.*

MRA philosophy

MRA believes in building the political consciousness of women and has not restricted itself merely to working with women in politics. MRA asserts that social and political empowerment go hand-in-hand. The problems faced by elected women cannot be viewed in isolation, as women's issues are interlinked and reinforcing. Therefore, there is a need to address women's subordination and its

structural causes. The gender discrimination in all sources of power is quite apparent. Men, particularly affluent and upper caste men, hold seats of power and authority. MRA believes that women's participation in political decision-making is a crucial step leading to realisation of their own rights. This understanding of power, or rather of the unequal distribution of power, means that MRA seeks to change present political processes in favour of women and weaker sections and to reinstate democratic practices to ensure gender and social justice.

Two slogans popularised at the Saigata convention express the essence of MRA's philosophy. The first one was: '**Vote hamara, Raj hamara, Leke rahenge, Leke rahenge**' (the vote is ours, the power is ours and we will continue to struggle to get it). This assertion, in particular, confirmed that women had rights as individuals and citizens and were not merely passive 'vote banks'. The other slogan, '**Gavat lokshahi gharat hukumshahi, chalnar nahi, chalnar nahi**', asserted that women want to have democracy within their villages as well as homes, and addressed the public-private divide and secondary status women face within their families.

Awareness and articulation of one's problems often culminates in efforts to tackle those problems. This convention thus sowed the seeds for a state-level process under the banner of the Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan. Various sessions discussed the need to address issues like water, ration, and implementation of government schemes through the Gram Panchayat. Noted social and political activists boosted the morale of the struggling women and asserted the need for collective and consistent efforts in order to change the situation in women's favour. The convention discussed the impact and implications of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and resolved to implement the same in both letter and spirit in their village panchayats. The participants endorsed a charter of demands and took a collective oath to plunge into action. In particular, to take active part in decision-making bodies, such as Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas, in order to strengthen women's role in local governance and to meaningfully contribute to development processes.

"OUR VOTE....."

On the 10th of March 2000, more than 1,200 rural women from different villages assembled on the occasion of the death anniversary of Krantijyoti Savitrabai Phule at Saigata village of Chandrapur district. They announced Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan by chanting slogans - "Our Vote...Our Governance". These women were either members of their gram panchayats', small savings groups or Mahila Mandals. As a result of Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan, 145 institutions and organisations are working together in 30 districts, 129 talukas and 841 villages in Maharashtra. Their objective is to encourage women's participation in Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayats.

From 'Gender issues', Human Development Report, Maharashtra - 2002

The Saigata convention concluded in an atmosphere of anticipation. It helped to create enthusiasm among the women as well as the network partners. Soon after, MRA was launched in over 800 villages covering 30 districts of Maharashtra by 151 organisations that had been involved in the convention.

‘Saigatanantar kay, Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan hai’ (what after Saigata, take Mahila Rajsatta Aandolan afar!) This slogan, popular among the women, expressed their spirit and agenda post- Saigata. Meanwhile, meetings and discussions involving network partners and women leaders were held to build a common understanding of MRA’s vision and philosophy. Though it is challenging to thrash out all issues in a collective, it is necessary to build clarity and consensus on some of the important areas of work. The ideological frame of MRA’s work, with its vision, mission, objectives and thrust area is given below.

Vision, Mission and Thrust Areas

Vision

A society in which women participate equally in the institution of local self governance, and are partners in the development processes and thus create an egalitarian, interdependent and human society.

Mission

Strengthening the governance role of elected women members of Gram Panchayats, other motivated members and development groups, by capacity building and creating a support system to ensure their active, efficient participation in PRI, aimed at building an egalitarian society.

Strategies

- The focus will be the groups of women engaged in various regional processes such as local mandals, SHGs, elected women in Gram Panchayats, women political leaders, and building their capacities, perspectives and attitude to enable them to play an effective role in governance.
- Panchayati raj institutions will be used as important entry points for such women to come into governance.
- Mass awareness, social mobilisation and sensitisation.
- A cadre of such women activists will evolve and be trained to take up statewide campaigns on identified issues.
- Support systems such as cells for information, advocacy, research, training etc will be established at taluka, district, regional and state level.
- Convergence of regional issue-based processes and efforts of all other actors such as judiciary, media, bureaucrats, NGO networks, among others,

for direct linkages with the roles of women in governance.

- RSCD, regional networks and alliance partners will play an enabling role in the whole process and help build linkages at the macro level.

Objectives

- Initiate massive education and awareness campaign on women's equal participation in PRI in identified villages of all districts of Maharashtra and expand all over the state through trained women leaders.
- Evolve capacity building processes for identified women leaders, facilitators and also for development activists at various levels to enable them to reach their goal.
- Create an interdependent support system from village to state in collaboration with existing actors on issues such as advocacy, lobbying, research, PRI and women related policies of the state.
- Launch a state-level campaign on identified issues and gaps in implementation of PRI, with focus on women's participation for policy change.

MRA's thrust areas

Perspective building: Developing a political ideology to strengthen the Gram Sabha

Enhancing the perspective and the attitude of community members and network partners to collectively develop a clear political identity, ideology, and perspective for pursuing MRA's mission. The focus is on key stakeholders such as PRI members, members from the community (both women and men), social activists, intellectuals, and political party workers etc, to understand what could be the criteria for strengthening the Gram Sabha process.

Capacity building: Enhancing potential and knowledge building

Capacity-building with the aim of enhancing self-confidence and assertiveness would include knowledge of PRI functioning, establishing communication with government officials, developing political negotiating skills and other kinds of skill development. Also, conducting programmes to enhance awareness among village women about their rights over village resources and their role in Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas, and also their general political rights. Development of a support collective, and information dissemination on various policy-level issues.

Organisation building: Developing a strong women's front

A large number of women who are not actual Gram Panchayat members are part of MRA and have their own agenda to address regarding gender, violence experienced

due to the liquor menace, child marriages and severe hunger etc. These are valid issues and need to be addressed as part of the campaign. Hence forging a strong women's front is a priority as is formulating a strategy that will bring in a large number of women at state level to address issues related to gender and governance as well as ensuring at least 50 per cent participation by women in the movement.

The fight against liquor-through Self Help Groups

"We had to bear verbal abuse and humiliation from men brandishing liquor bottles. As women, we struggled day and night to implement prohibition on liquor. People in the opposite camp mocked us and jeered but we did not back away. We made our village liquor-free."

This was the experience of Vanita Shrikant Kirpan, the woman sarpanch of Pipri village located in Mouda taluka in Nagpur district. Vanitatai, a 30-year-old, BA graduate narrates her experience of three years as a sarpanch.

When Vanitatai was elected sarpanch,, she was completely unaware of the day-to-day functioning of a panchayat. Despite this, she started taking the lead in different schemes like laying drains and maintaining them, building roads and the cleanliness drive. She distributed uniforms to dalit students from the Gram Panchayat funds.

Later Vanitatai came in contact with MRA. Once acquainted with MRA and having gained more knowledge, Vanitatai's scope of work has been expanding. She has also established a village branch of MRA to create awareness about politics among the women. Increasing her contact with the women in the village, she has started forming SHGs.

The anti-liquor movement began by organising the women in the SHGs, the workers of MRA, and police officers. Women from Khandala village, one kilometer away from Pipri, started campaigning against liquor. They went to the liquor shop and confiscated the liquor. In the beginning they had to face verbal abuse and humiliation. They were aware that for something good to happen, they had to pay a price.

The so-called elite in the village told her husband that Vanitatai was getting into unnecessary matters. That she was doing good for the village was one thing, but that did not mean she should start an anti-liquor drive. They threatened dire consequences. Her husband ignored these threats and stood by her. As a result, Vanitatai could lead the struggle more confidently. The women started a signature campaign. They presented a petition to the police station and built pressure from time to time. All these tactics worked in a combined manner and the liquor in the village disappeared. She gives all credit to the women in the village and her husband with whose support this victory was possible.

Today Vanitatai is a member of the Panchayat Raj Women's Front. She attends all meetings of the front. She tries to understand things that are new and beyond her daily life. She pursues matters like having a Vishakha Dakshata Samiti in the village for women who are treated wrongly at work places to register their grievances and sees to it that the police patil in the village pays better attention to complaints registered by women.

3

MRA Initiatives: Grassroots Action

CAMPAIGN TO STRENGTHEN THE GRAM SABHA

Any movement evolves and builds on multiple efforts that revolve around its core ideology. Similarly MRA, as a collective effort, has also developed from wide ranging activities carried out from village to state level. These broadly include campaigns, awareness activities, village level programmes, state level processes like advocacy and pressure groups, participation in election and governance. This chapter gives an overview of major MRA initiatives and their overall outcome and impact. For the sake of presentation, MRA action is divided in three parts: Grassroots Action, State Level Action and Process of Organisation Building, though all are integrally linked. Grassroots Action is presented in three parts - Gram Sabha campaign, experiences of contesting elections and participation in governance.

Campaign to promote Gram Sabha - *Gram Sabha Gaurav Abhiyan*

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment recognises the Gram Sabha as a dynamic decision-making unit. The Gram Sabha is considered as a vehicle to bring about participation of people in making decisions that matter to them. It also provides detailed guidelines in terms of frequency of the meetings, agenda, procedure to call and conduct meetings, required quorum and record keeping etc. However, the way this democratic exercise is carried out in reality is quite contrary to the spirit of this provision. For instance, people are unable to attend Gram Sabha meetings because they are not informed through prior notices. The practice of adjourning meetings is also common to keep people from attending the meetings.

Activating and strengthening this people's forum thus became a primary concern of MRA. Consequently a campaign was carried out to highlight the significance of the Gram Sabha and to activate its meetings at the village level. The campaign, known as the Gramsabha Gaurav Abhiyan, was formally launched on October 2, 2001. Its thrust was on:

- Empowerment of the Gram Sabha and provision of women's gram sabha

meetings prior to the village Gram Sabha.

- Decentralisation of power through sub-committees formed with the active involvement of Gram Sabha members.
- Devolution of finance to Gram Panchayats and utilisation of the budget as per Gram Sabha resolutions.

The campaign was launched in a big way using all possible modes of communication and participation. Special slogans were prepared and painted on village walls. A number of pamphlets giving information about the Gram Sabha and committees were distributed throughout the villages. In fact, the Maharashtra government had already published a government resolution (GR) on April 15, 1999, which clearly laid out guidelines for Gram Sabha meetings and the formation of sub-committees dealing with education and overall monitoring. The campaign popularised this GR through songs, street plays, rallies and slogans, so much so that the sarpanch and gramsevak could no longer shirk their responsibility. The GR said that the sarpanch can be removed from the post if s/he fails to call Gram Sabha meetings in time. Though this provision was never actually used, it helped to put across the significance of these meetings and the corresponding accountability of elected leaders.

The major thrust of the campaign at the village level was on activating the Gram Sabha with people's participation. The campaign also urged for policy level changes seeking recognition for the Gram Sabha as the supreme body. This meant that all decisions pertaining to village work would be taken in Gram Sabha meetings and these would be considered final. The campaign also demanded that the Gram Sabha should have control over all natural resources within the village. The demand for special provision of a Mahila Gram Sabha was also put forth. The policy changes were pursued with other like-minded leaders and organisations in the state and in December 2002 the state government declared the changes enacted to strengthen the Gram Sabha. The changes include:

- Allocation of effective powers to the Gram Sabha as per legal provision enacted in December 2002.
- Women's Gram Sabha now made mandatory before the general Gram Sabha.
- Acceptance by the state government to make appropriate amendments to resolve the issue of adjourned /suspended Gram Sabhas.
- Block Development Officers are advised to give adequate publicity to taluka meetings to ensure the participation of women.

The campaign proved successful in reaching out to common people and marginalised sections and resulted in their increased participation in Gram Sabha meetings. More importantly, Gram Sabha meetings started to take place. In some villages women demanded that their groups should be informed about these

meetings in advance. Women in large numbers started attending these meetings. In some places, members of the dalit community questioned the Gram Sabha proceedings in drawing up the list of below-poverty-line (BPL) families, which was done without really having a meeting. All these indicated that the general attitude of indifference is slowly being replaced by a renewed interest and hope in participatory processes of governance. This process of rejuvenation of the Gram Sabha, a forum of the people, is a significant achievement of the Gram Sabha Gaurav Abhiyan.

Over the years, MRA has become more persuasive about its primary agenda which is to strengthen the Gram Sabha. After having convinced women to express their views more vocally and people to take part in village governance, MRA's Gram Sabha campaign has graduated to more strategic issues, such as accountability and transparency. In fact, the process of strengthening the Gram Sabha has been furthered through various innovative and strategic efforts, including participation in flag hoisting events and demanding mahila gram sabha meetings.

Flag-hoisting events

One of the interesting spin-offs of the Gram Sabha campaign was MRA's intervention in national day celebrations. Generally, women do not take part in public events like Republic Day or Independence Day. They may take on the responsibility of cleaning or decorating the venue, but have no role in the programme or the Gram Sabha meetings followed by the programme. Generally, the sarpanch has the honour of chairing the function and hoisting the flag. In villages where women held this post, the flag-hoisting was done either by the ex-sarpanch or some other local village leader. Traditionally, powerful local leaders seemed unwilling to share this honour with women and backward class representatives. In a way, the true picture of dominance and power gets unfurled with the flag. After seeing how women sarpanches in some villages were dissuaded from hoisting the flag, MRA started a campaign to uphold women's right to participate in public programmes and for women sarpanches to unfurl the flag.

This seemingly simple step - for women to be part of national day celebrations - caused unrest and led to dramatic incidents in many villages. For instance, in Varve village in Pune district, the women arrived at the Gram Panchayat office at the appointed time of eight o'clock to attend the flag-hoisting ceremony only to discover that the flag had already been hoisted. Local leaders, worried that the women would insist that the woman sarpanch should hoist the flag, had hurriedly held the ceremony before the women arrived. In a couple of villages in Marathwada region, local leaders openly opposed women and scheduled caste sarpanches who wanted to lead the ceremony. In adivasi dominated villages in Konkan and North Maharashtra community members allowed women to take charge of the programme, while in a few villages in Kolhapur district women were vehemently opposed and

criticised for their initiative. Local leaders instigated family members and husbands of the women to stop them from what they thought of as 'crossing limits'.

The women's enthusiasm to participate in the functions was evident. In some villages women rehearsed the national anthem to present on the occasion; women's groups decided to distribute sweets to the school children participating in the programme, and in Murshidabad village, women suggested that the water supply timings be changed - they wanted the water to be released earlier so that could finish their work early and take part in the flag-hoisting ceremony. Women felt very happy and proud to be participating and now the presence of women at these and other public events has become the norm wherever MRA is working.

Participation in the flag-hoisting event was an effective strategy to address both gender and caste discrimination. MRA's initiative has been much appreciated and applauded and soon became an 'official order'. During a national level seminar chaired by Maharashtra's chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, MRA member Kushavarta Bele presented the plight of women and of backward caste sarpanches, especially the disregard for their power and position shown in not allowing them to unfurl the flag. The chief minister said an order would be issued to stop this injustice, and within months a government resolution was circulated, which said that the flag must be hoisted by the sarpanch and no woman or backward caste sarpanch could be deprived of her right to do so. The order, which was implemented on January 26, 2003, has helped a large number of women and scheduled caste sarpanches in Maharashtra to lead flag-hoisting ceremonies.

Advocating Mahila Sabhas

Many of the problems related to the holding of Gram Sabha meetings arise from lack of awareness on the part of people and/or lack of accountability of elected representatives and the administration. Gram Sabha meetings are primarily viewed as the preserve of men where the presence of women is considered to be unnecessary. If holding Gram Sabha meetings is a challenge, ensuring women's participation in these meetings is an even bigger challenge. Even women who are quite motivated and informed found it difficult to assert themselves in these meetings. The gender bias was so apparent that when women insisted on attending these meetings, they were humiliated. Women said that their presence was not taken seriously; sometimes derogatory remarks were made about them. This made women unwilling to attend the meetings and since their participation was not consistent, their concerns were not reflected in village planning.

In the light of these experiences, MRA decided to advocate for a provision to have special meetings for women - a Mahila Gram Sabha - as a way of ensuring women's involvement in local decision-making. The Mahila Gram Sabha would provide women a safe place to get together in order to understand and contribute to the process

of village governance. MRA demanded that the Mahila Gram Sabha should take place one day before the village Gram Sabha meeting and that the decisions taken in the former would be duly considered in the later meeting. More importantly, women were expected to attend the village Gram Sabha to ensure that their deliberations had a place in the overall decisions. Clearly the Mahila Gram Sabha was a stop-gap provision, to facilitate confidence and acceptance of women in the village Gram Sabha.

Admitting the relevance of such special meetings, the state government passed a resolution on October 12, 2002, which made it mandatory to organise a Mahila Sabha one day before the village Gram Sabha. It was also noted that the sarpanch would be responsible for calling this meeting and the gramsevak would be present to record proceedings.

This government resolution was widely publicised in the villages where MRA was working and it led to the demand to organise Mahila Sabhas. A study done by MRA two years after the provision was enforced showed that women are keen to share their problems and express their views on various developmental matters. Issues such as toilets, drinking water, rations, health centre, roads, BPL (below-poverty-line) list etc, have received top priority. The demand for prohibiting liquor and for employment has also been taken up in some villages. Unfortunately, not many of these concerns were addressed by the local leadership. In fact, it was observed that neither the local leadership nor the administration was keen to hold these meetings. Therefore, despite the state order, Mahila Sabha meetings have not really caught on. They are held only in villages where the women are aware and are able to put pressure on the concerned leaders and authorities. Interestingly, Mahila Gram Sabha meetings have distorted the perception about women's participation: the Mahila Sabha is considered to be a 'women's forum' and the village Gram Sabha is considered to be an 'all male' forum.

Despite these lacunae, the process of coming together through Mahila Sabhas has resulted in improved participation of women in village meetings.

Transparency in utilising public funds

The Gram Sabha is supposed to be the forum where discussions about the budget are held. Though decisions taken at these meetings are not binding on the Gram Panchayat, it has the potential to be an effective forum to facilitate clean decision making. A vibrant Gram Sabha is more likely to identify genuine cases who can benefit from government schemes, to follow-up collective decisions and to check manipulation of Gram Panchayat funds, if any.

MRA has taken up several interesting programmes in its endeavor to promote Gram Sabhas. In 2003-04, MRA initiated the '*hishob dakhva*' (show us accounts)

programme. This required people to not only participate in Gram Sabha meetings, but to also be aware of the final records submitted by the sarpanch and gramsevak on behalf of the village. People would get to see a copy of the actual approved budget and the annual accounts of their Gram Panchayat. The people's right to see the records was asserted throughout this campaign. The provision of 10% budget for women's welfare and 15% budget for underprivileged sections was also ensured through this campaign.

Joint ownership

Another remarkable initiative commenced following the Government Resolution (dated November 20, 2003) to give joint ownership of households. The order urged Gram Panchayats to take the decision to include the names of both the husband and wife on the ownership document of household property, thus ensuring that a woman had a legal right to the house she lived in. This GR was also widely publicised and efforts to push it through the Gram Sabha were taken up. In many villages women successfully lobbied for implementation of this GR, and in others, a public debate was started to implement the GR. Joint ownership was ensured in a number of villages and new nameplates giving the names of husband and wife were displayed. This has brought a sense of dignity and self-assurance to women.

Find a challenge and you will find Belebai!

Kushavarta Bele from Devani village in Latur district is a committed and confident leader. Inspired by her participation in the Saigata convention, she first became an active member of the Gram Panchayat. In eight years she has emerged as a political leader and is currently holding the post of sabhapati of the women and child development committee in Latur Zilla Parishad.

A hardcore social activist at heart, Kushavartatai has never followed conventional ways to rise up the political ladder. She has always been scornful of the political tactics of her co-members and critical about manipulative ways to get political mileage. "Village politics and village matters have 60% truth and 40% dishonesty in them," she says. "As a social worker, I am upset by this. Dishonesty is not justified. However, one cannot force honesty all the time, but I have very strongly demanded that when the poor, landless and needy come for help, they must not be troubled for money. No money should change hands for certifications. I don't tolerate this at all."

Kushavartatai has made efforts to put more life into the Gram Sabha of the village, making women's participation more visible and vocal. Narrating an incident in one of the Gram Sabhas she says, "The issue was regarding distribution of land for housing. Women were also present at this Gram Sabha. Just as the sabha was to begin, it started pouring. The crowd began dispersing. It looked like there would be

no Gram Sabha. The register was kept at one end and people were asked to sign it. As we were to discuss an important issue, I said that the sabha must be held. People waited and a list of 45 people eligible for housing was approved. We saw to it that the really needy were included in the list. I then proposed that the plots distributed should be in the name of the woman. After some discussion, it was agreed that the plots should be in the name of both, the husband and the wife. However, how would all agree to this? Some tongues wagged - you put your wife's name too and what if she ran away tomorrow? Many nodded their approval. Then we had to raise the question as to what would a wife do if her husband ran away? After that, our proposal was accepted."

Fighting a close battle, Kushavartatai won the Zilla Parishad election and became head of its women and child development committee. At the very first meeting of the committee she raised a simple question: why were men served chilled water in bottles whereas women were served normal water in glasses? The women, with the support of a few men, stopped this practice. She also politely challenged the clause that said that budget allocations for women should be a minimum of 10%. Minimum of 10% did not mean only 10%, she said. She managed to get a raise of Rs 5 lakh in the budget for women. This is just the beginning. Belebai does not fight for herself. She, who would walk for miles from one village to another, has been given an Ambassador car. It is filled with activists and women. She feels that a jeep would have accommodated more activists.

CONTESTING ELECTIONS

Elections are an integral part of MRA's mission, as being in governance implies seeking power through democratic means. MRA has always encouraged and supported women to be part of elections, as contestants or campaigners. In fact, one of the significant initiatives that followed soon after the Saigata convention was the spontaneous participation of women in Gram Panchayat elections. Three months after the Saigata convention in March 2000, the Gram Panchayat elections were declared in some parts of Marathwada and Western Maharashtra. Women were motivated to contest these elections and be a direct part of decision-making bodies. They contested seats reserved for them but the motivational levels both of the women and the NGOs supporting them were so high, that in a few places they even decided to make all-women panels or to contest from open seats. A similar enthusiasm was evident in the Gram Panchayat elections in Konkan that were declared soon after.

Regional networks organised special pre-election training programmes for women who were either aspiring to contest themselves or planning to back women candidates in their villages. Obviously women did not have money or experience. They did not have the backing of any political stronghold in the village either. Still, they evolved their own strategies for campaigning, which made this effort even

more important.

In many respects this first step in the election fray was a valuable learning experience. By and large the effort was well meaning but lacked strategic understanding of the overall process of elections. For instance, there was not much clarity on which panel to choose, and women ended up accepting whichever panel approached them, without negotiating. There were also instances where the panels ignored their women candidates and did not involve them in campaigning at all. In this way male members attempted to keep all control with them. Women being inexperienced in negotiations succumbed, but in a few places they expressed their disapproval of such uncalled for interference from men and went ahead with independent campaigning with active support from other women. There was also very little awareness about election procedures, particularly about restructuring of wards and the process of filing nominations. All the lacunae were addressed to a great extent in future attempts to participate in elections.

As of now, participation in elections has become an ongoing programme on MRA's agenda. It is difficult to keep count of how many women have contested and won elections. After having gone through a number of elections, women have now developed a better understanding of the process as a whole. Many women have been elected two or three times successively. A large number of women have contested the upper tiers of the PRIs, such as Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad. Only recently, Kushavarta Bele from Devani in Latur district, a long time associate of MRA and a dynamic leader, was elected as Zilla Parishad member and heads the women and child development committee.

Apart from participating in elections, MRA is also active in organising pre-election campaigns. These are aimed at building awareness among voters in order to have a free and fair election. The campaign highlights political rights and the responsibilities of people, and persuades them to choose the right candidate. Sometimes campaigns revolve around specific issues or themes as for instance the focus on 'clean elections', in a pre-election campaign for Gram Panchayat elections in October 2007.

In spite of such practical experiences and orientation, elections still remain a challenging period and women encounter various problems. Most often, elections are a power-seeking game rather than a democratic exercise to choose people's representatives. Divisive tactics are used, as is money and liquor, to sway voters. Therefore conflicts with other established contenders are inevitable. Women are pressurised to withdraw their nominations; sometimes this pressure is exerted from the woman's family members. Thus, around election time, there are conflicts with outsiders and at times even with one's own family. However, women have developed immense maturity and the way they view their success or failure is admirable. There are many women who have not been able to win an election, but

this has not deterred them. Some say that it has been a learning experience and some say that they will try again.

Undoubtedly elections are fought with the aim to win, but not at the cost of values you believe in. In 2006, Maya Sorte from Vadval village in Latur district contested the Gram Panchayat elections for the second time. She was contesting an open seat against a male candidate who had three children. Going by the two-child norm policy of the state government, he was not eligible to contest. As is common, he had submitted false personal information to suit the criteria for candidature. A one-line complaint from Maya, who was his opponent, would have barred him from contesting. Maya's panel members insisted that she should go ahead with the complaint. As a principle, MRA is against the two-child norm, which goes against the constitutional rights of the individual. Therefore Maya was unwilling to use this weapon to disqualify her opponent. Her supporters and panel members could not understand the value-based politics she was attempting to pursue so Maya told them she would make the complaint, though in fact she did not. She won the seat and was elated by the fact that she had not compromised her values to succeed. Maya believes that power is just a means and not an end. And many instances in her political life substantiate her conviction.

The practice of unopposed elections is another important issue that women often have to deal with. This can be either a very useful, or a highly imperious, exercise, depending on the way the consensus is established. If the candidates are really unanimously selected by the Gram Sabha, villagers can be spared the conflicts and costs incurred during elections. Some villages do demonstrate such unity and therefore unopposed elections do not hamper the democratic spirit behind choosing one's representatives. However, there are also instances where an unopposed election is just a façade to disguise control of the village by political strongmen. Decisions pertaining to reserved seats, both for women and scheduled caste representatives, are taken by these local leaders and these posts are selected rather than elected. Local leaders obviously choose only those who they know will remain in their control. Interestingly, the state government provides an incentive for unopposed elections to the Gram Panchayat. Since unopposed elections save money that would otherwise have gone in electioneering, part of the amount saved is given to the Gram Panchayat as an award. This incentive plan does not bother to find out whether the process of selection was genuinely unanimous.

Over the years, women's aspirations have risen and they have begun to contest elections for upper tiers, such as the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad. Unlike Gram Panchayat elections, these two elections are contested through a political party. Aspiring candidates thus have two options: either they can get a nomination through some political party, or they can contest as independent candidates. The latter is workable only if the candidate is strong in his/her work base and resources.

The constituencies in these elections are much larger and hence campaigning is costly as compared to Gram Panchayat elections, making it necessary to have the backing of a political party. Almost everywhere a major challenge before the women wanting to contend for the upper tiers of governance is which political party to choose. It is also a challenge before MRA, and has been vehemently discussed on several occasions.

Various wings of political parties active at village level also attempt to tap women involved in MRA to join them. The interests of these political parties vary and are situational. Mostly they view MRA members as more active women and feel that this group of women would strengthen their agenda.

MRA members are seen as capable leaders with a strong support system, mass following, and credibility among village people due to their developmental work. Seats are offered to these women, especially by political parties that have a weak mass base, because they get a readymade woman leader and can benefit from her electorally. Associating with political parties is likely to benefit women in terms of wider support, resources, and contacts. There are women who have decided on their own about joining a particular party and still continue the work of MRA. But some women have joined political parties with religious ideologies that go against the values of MRA, and this has been a challenging experience for MRA. But the fact that political parties want MRA members on their side is a recognition of the strength of the women.

At present MRA has outlined a broad position to guide its members about joining an appropriate political party in their area. Clearly it is beyond a collective's strength to influence national or regional political parties. Therefore the broad position suggests that women join political parties that are democratic in their functioning, value secularism and uphold the cause of the poor and marginalised. These are basic non-negotiable pointers decided upon by MRA while joining in or working within a political party.

In sum, it can be said that MRA views participating in Gram Panchayat elections as a very important strategy to influence local governance. It is an opportunity to reach out to the electorate and spread the message one is working for. Therefore, though winning matters, whether one has won or lost the election does not become the only parameter to measure success. Taking part in elections without compromising one's value base is considered more important than winning anyhow. It is

A Landmark in History

In 2003, the seat of sarpanch in the Dharme Gram Panchayat was announced as reserved for a scheduled caste woman candidate. Chayatai expressed her desire to contest the elections. Her opponents started spreading rumours about her, creating a panic among the menfolk that once Chayatai is elected, she will sideline them. Another woman candidate, clearly a proxy candidate since she was uneducated and hearing impaired, was put up by the opposition. Chayatai was targeted in every possible way. She had to face double subjugation – on account of being a woman and on account of being a dalit.

Chayatai did not give in and decided to fight back, though she was aware of the fact that she lacked the economic power that her opponents boasted of. However, she was satisfied that though she did not have money, she had a record of good work to fall back on.

Chayatai went ahead and filed her nomination papers from both the SC reserved category and the open category. Her opponents challenged her move, but the tehsildar supported her.

However, at the time of announcing the results, the tehsildar announced the result in the reserved seat alone, in which Chayatai had secured less votes. She had actually won the open category seat but the tehsildar did not disclose those results and directly announced that her opponent had won the elections. When she came to know about this, Chayatai opposed the decision and fought with the tehsildar. Though her opponents started celebrating, most villagers were confused. The tehsildar refused to budge and asked her to approach higher authorities.

The next two days were unfortunately holidays, Saturday and Sunday. On Monday Chayatai took xerox copies of the vote counting documents to the district-level election officer, but he too turned a cold shoulder. Chayatai warned him that she would go to court to seek justice. "What is the use of going to court? The court will take at least five years to give a verdict, and by then your term will get over and the entire exercise will be futile," the election officer replied.

Undeterred, Chayatai filed a case in the court at Latur. When her lawyer saw her papers he assured her that she was right; she really had won the election. This increased Chayatai's confidence manifold.

However, the court procedures were extensive and expensive. Every day a minimum of Rs 5000 was required and when the case was going on, Chayatai and her husband were unable to go home even during festival time.

Meanwhile back in the village, Chayatai's opponents were banking on her absence. They tried to convince the people that she was wrong and that their candidate was rightfully elected. They also made a new board for the Gram Panchayat, mentioning names of the newly elected members, including their own candidate.

In the court, though, justice finally ruled. The court passed judgment in Chayatai's favour in a mere 15 days. She was pronounced as the rightful member of the Gram Panchayat and the membership of her opposing candidate was dismissed. Subsequently, the district election officer was suspended.

Chayatai's case was indeed a landmark in judicial history. It is therefore rightly used as a referral case in the Maharashtra State Act.

PARTICIPATION IN THE GOVERNANCE PROCESS

Women are still considered to be backdoor entrants who have gained entry because of reservations and therefore are not easily accepted as representatives. At the same time, there is also overwhelming anticipation and they are expected to prove themselves. Most of the time they start work in a hostile environment. They face many challenges, especially those who take their work seriously. The representatives belonging to dalit or other underprivileged sections also face heavy resistance from upper castes when they attempt to exercise their political power. It is a fact that women have to operate within a social context that is patriarchal, communal, divided by class and caste, and therefore constricting. What is possible is determined to a large extent by this social context.

However, these critical impediments arising out of social structures are not the only constricting issues. The structure itself, within which the representatives have to work, stands on shaky ground.

Though the 73rd Constitutional Amendment grants autonomous status to Gram Panchayats, these bodies are still viewed as implementing agencies by the administrative machinery. Even within the village the power centre lies outside the purview of democratically elected bodies, and caste panchayats or Gavki, are the dominant structures that influence local decision-making processes. The devolution of funds as directed by the Amendment is yet to take place and therefore Gram Panchayats are not financially strong and independent. This wider context sets the stage for understanding any interventions, including MRA, that attempt to strengthen grassroots governance processes.

Opposition to proxy members

The very first task that the MRA-supported elected women took up was to assert women's representation within the Gram Panchayat. It is not uncommon for husbands or other male relatives of the elected women to work on their behalf. These proxy members even attend meetings saying that the concerned women members either do not have time from household work, or do not understand Gram Panchayat work. These excuses are easily accepted in a patriarchal set-up and proxy members continue to enjoy authority and status that in reality is meant for their womenfolk.

In many villages MRA backed women members opposed such proxy representation. When the very first Gram Panchayat meeting of the newly elected body took place, women members urged the real members to be present. Male members thought otherwise. "Why should the women be bothered? Let them just come to give their signatures and go back. This is how it has always been," they said. But the active women members insisted that only elected women representatives should

participate and even if they do not know anything now, they will learn over time.

MRA members are aware of their own responsibilities and participate in every Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha meeting. They also mobilise women for Gram Sabha meetings. The women have also played an active role in the formation of development committees and making them active.

Capacity Building

In order to make women's participation in decision making bodies more active and effective they need to be well versed with the procedures. This is where capacity building and training to make elected women more knowledgeable and articulate comes in. MRA has engaged in such training programmes since the beginning and the process of training and capacity building has evolved over the years.

Capacity building is aimed at enhancing the self-confidence and assertiveness of elected women by imparting important information, inculcating value-based politics and enhancing skills for better functioning and negotiation. These training programmes give practical information on panchayati raj and government schemes and information on various government resolutions that are important for Gram Panchayats. The programmes also give exposure to panchayat and zilla parishad offices and hold interactions with government authorities. There are specific sessions to upgrade skills, such as budget preparation. The training programmes are participatory and interactive and encourage personal sharing by women to facilitate mutual learning.

The need for systematic inputs for elected women was recognised by MRA from the very start. The capacity building programmes enhance the knowledge and confidence of elected women in their work. In the initial years, training programmes were organised at taluka levels. In later years, in association with The Hunger Project, the programmes were carried out for a cluster of villages and the women participants were also encouraged to form a forum at taluka and district levels.

MRA believes that the process of capacity building cannot be restricted to classroom teaching, but must be initiated with training programmes; however, several other activities are required to develop and sustain the change process. Therefore experiential learning of the women through their participation in local level governance process, issue based campaigns and community mobilisation is considered equally important.

MRA has also evolved innovative exercises to help elected women and local women leaders to develop an understanding about the challenges in the governance processes. One such exercise in 'Vastav darshan', which means understanding

reality by studying the status of Gram Panchayat functioning. The women are expected to visit five Gram Panchayats in their vicinity and take down all possible information about its functioning by talking to elected women. Villages not associated with MRA were selected for this exercise. Similarly Gram Panchayat Vastav Darshans or visits are organised for women to overcome their shyness in visiting the office and interacting with the representatives and gramsevak. Gram Panchayat Darshan has helped make local governance processes more familiar and information more accessible.

In order to provide need based inputs and information to elected women, MRA is also planning to develop regional level centres within the state.

No-confidence motion

Male leaders either try to co-opt newly elected women, or if that does not work, pressurise them to step down. The no-confidence motion is often used against women who the established leadership find troublesome. Several women sarpanches face a no-confidence motion on the pretext that they lack the ability to work. The real reasons often lie in the local power dynamics and the role women are expected to play within the schemes of things. In the present scenario, provision of no-confidence is largely misused against women who are assertive and do not succumb to pressure.

MRA confronted the issue of no-confidence for the first time in the case of Sumitra Kanhant, a young, unmarried, active and cheerful leader from the Warli adivasi community and a resident of Satkor village in Thane district, who contested elections in May 2001. Earlier she had worked to close down liquor shops in the village and was actively involved in several other women's activities. Sumitra received the most number of votes and was even selected as deputy sarpanch. The sarpanch, Damu, was a youngster with no past experience in political work, but eager to make his mark in his village. Under their leadership, the Gram Panchayat implemented several government schemes in one year. The earlier sarpanch was very upset at losing power and started working against the newly elected members, Damu and Sumitra, with the help of their opponents in the panchayat. Some of these members were upset with Sumitra for her opposition to the sale of liquor in the village. Within months, the ex-sarpanch succeeded in getting a majority of members on his side and made them pass a no-confidence motion against Damu and Sumitra. Local liquor peddlers supported this opposition lobby.

Sumitra didn't think her opponents would go to the extent of making false allegations against her and was hurt when they called her incompetent. The appeal against the no-confidence motion could not be made within the stipulated time and Sumitra lost her post. MRA raised this issue at state level, appealing in various forums, such as the State Women's Commission and the state government, to take

appropriate action. A fact-finding team was sent to the village to discover the real picture. Though the overall atmosphere in the village was tense, a number of villagers were in support of Sumitra and Damu. Over a period of time, Sumitra came out of her shock and started actively participating in the Gram Panchayat as a member.

At MRA level, Sumitra's case became a rallying point to highlight the misuse of the no-confidence motion to bar active members and to protect the interests of local strongholds. Other similar cases were publicised through the media and presented before the state government. All these efforts led to a policy change in favor of women representatives. A no-confidence motion against a sarpanch or deputy sarpanch is passed when two-third members of the Gram Panchayat vote in favour of it. The margin of vote was increased from two-third to three-fourth in case of women representatives.

This change in policy indicates that the government has taken note of the problem and is willing to provide protection to elected women representatives. The policy change was expected to check the rampant misuse of this provision. However, in reality, elected women still confront no-confidence motions, especially when they attempt to question the local leadership. Recently, Lata Chikram, a woman sarpanch in Chandrapur, in the Vidarbha region, faced a no-confidence motion. For two years the majority in the panchayat had no problem with her. In fact, they appreciated her initiative in carrying out a sanitation drive in the village. When the village received an award, someone else was sent to get it on behalf of the village. Lata felt insulted and asked the members why they had sent another member instead of her, the sarpanch, who had worked for it. The members disapproved of her courage in standing up for herself and passed a no-confidence motion against her.

Protection along with reservations

Women members who are active or who confront local power elites are subjected to mental and physical harassment. When women realise their rights and are empowered enough to assert them, a reaction is bound to occur. MRA members have dealt with a number of such cases and have intervened when such instances have taken place outside their own area of work.

When Sunita Agham from Shirasgoan in Yeotmal district became sarpanch the local leaders were very upset. For the past twenty years the post had been held by a single man. Since the post of sarpanch was reserved, he had to give it up and Sunita got the chance to become sarpanch. However, she got no support from the other members. The ex-sarpanch interfered in the functioning of the panchayat and always dominated meetings. Once in a Gram Sabha meeting he got so agitated that he threw chili powder on Sunita's face. The meeting was disrupted and people

dispersed. Sunita immediately went to the police station to lodge a complaint against the villagers who attempted to harm her. The police refused to take the complaint. Local MRA activists soon got the news and rushed to the spot. They accompanied Sunita to the police station again and the complaint was properly registered.

When a woman belongs to a socially backward community, the resistance gets more severe. Nanda Nikam from Bhodni village in Indapur block, Pune district, belongs to the chamar caste and was selected as sarpanch, as the post was reserved for OBC women. The upper caste members did not co-operate with her and harassed her in several ways hoping that she would get frustrated and resign. However, Nanda decided to fight back and went to lodge a complaint against a physical assault on her. The police neither filed the first information report (FIR) nor gave her the protection she asked for. Here, too, MRA activists visited the aggrieved woman and supported her to lodge a complaint and get protection.

Such instances are abundant and many never come to light. The prevalent gender and caste biases work against elected women who attempt to exercise their political rights. Such instances also indicate that the provision of reservations will become effective only when women are assured of support and protection, otherwise most women would not be willing to go against their families or communities to take on the challenges that their new role demands.

MRA thinks that providing protection to candidates in reserved categories is essential. In this context MRA has demanded that grievance redressal centres be set up at district level. This demand was raised and unanimously approved in a national level seminar organised by the Maharashtra State Women's Commission and MRA, in Mumbai, on September 26-27, 2002. These centres could provide timely support and guidance to elected women who face harassment or pressure of any sort, including unjustified no-confidence motions. However, the demand is still very much at the conceptual level; concerted and collective efforts are required to create the necessary political will to ensure protective mechanisms or measures for elected women become a reality.

Demoralising tactics

Character assassination is repeatedly used to demoralise women who challenge existing stereotypes and assert themselves. Women leaders involved with MRA have faced such intimidation on several occasions. Working as a sarpanch means interacting with villagers, co-members and government officers, who happen to be mostly men. When women relate to men, even as part of their work, they invite criticism. Ratnamala Vaidya has been a Gram Panchayat member for three consecutive terms since 1994. She has even contested a Zilla Parishad election. Her popularity and work base made her a strong contender and opponents used all

possible tactics, including character assassination, to demoralise her. She was portrayed as a woman of 'loose character' and her opponents went to the extent of distributing hand-outs that painted her as a 'bad woman'. MRA supported Ratnamla to stand firm and respond to the baseless allegations. Women who do not get any support in such trying circumstances often succumb to pressures, get demoralised and withdraw themselves in the end.

Women from backward communities have a tougher time, as they have to fight against caste prejudices as well. There is strong opposition to their becoming sarpanches. Jyoti Meshram from the Kotgal Gram Panchayat in Gadchiroli district is a representative example of how upper caste men resist sharing power with women from a dalit community. In 2002, Jyoti was elected as sarpanch for this 11-member Gram Panchayat, as the post was reserved for a scheduled caste woman. Jyoti is an educated woman and enjoys very good support from her family and community. She was quite motivated to take up the responsibility. However, upper caste leaders did not approve of her authority, especially her control over Gram Panchayat funds. In the very first Gram Sabha, the upper caste lobby pressurised the meeting to pass a resolution barring the sarpanch from having any authority over financial transactions. The responsibility was handed over to another member belonging to an upper caste and Jyoti was deprived of any rights associated with her post.

Support mechanisms

Women need a supportive and enabling environment to help them deal with any kind of resistance. Where women have a local support base - either a women's group or their own community members - they are able to fight back. Voluntary organisations can also play an important role in providing support at crucial times. When the elected women are able to fall back on any such support structure, they are able to work more strongly and effectively. Similarly, being part of a group or network broadens the perspective of women members and enhances their self-confidence. Many women who have been associated with MRA have changed and developed over time. The realisation that they are part of a strong and successful collective itself inculcates a positive attitude and sense of solidarity among women.

Such collectives are not only important as support structures for elected women, but they also help to make them accountable. The sense of accountability is fundamentally important to engage in value-based politics. Women's participation implies that they represent the concerns of women and underprivileged sections and make use of their authority to address these concerns. Therefore what kind of politics women engage in also matters when we support and promote their participation in decision making. It is likely that elected women will follow established models of politics and think in terms of individual and short-term gains. Such a model is clearly not in the interests of a majority of women. What is power

for, is an important question that women representatives have to answer and this accountability can be sought in women's groups and other community based groups that support them. Thus, building local groups and organisations proves to be a mutually beneficial phenomenon for elected women as well as village women at large.

Vijaya Bahirat from Kurkundi village in Sangamner block is a sarpanch as well as active member of a self-help group. She was a Gram Panchayat member in the previous body and was not very aware about her role at that time. She attended meetings occasionally, that too, only to give her signature. However, in her second consecutive term, and being associated with MRA, she became more aware. With active support from self-help groups in her village she has been able to regularise Gram Sabha meetings. The women collectively planned to do *shramdan* for constructing an approach road to their village. Later, Vijaya managed to get a proposal for road construction passed by the gramsevak.

Archana Jatkar from Pokhari village in Pusad taluka in Yeotmal district openly admits that women in her village are her source of strength. Archana formed three self-help groups soon after she got elected in September 2005. Thus she developed close ties with a group of 45-50 women. She motivated the women to take part in Gram Sabha meetings. Archana observes that when women are present in Gram Sabha meetings, she feels more confident to address the meeting. The women also backed her in the developmental programmes that she planned. The Gram Panchayat was to raise Rs 15,000 from villagers to get a drinking water scheme for the village. General appeals to contribute did not garner the required amount. As time was running out, Archana discussed the problem with the group members. The three groups together gave Rs 15,000 to the Gram Panchayat. The women also accompany Archana whenever she has to visit the Panchayat Samiti or Zilla Parishad offices. Thus Archana and a number of women like her have been able to create their own support base through self-help groups. Many such examples can be cited to show how elected women associated with MRA have mobilised other women, and in some villages mobilised communities, as their support group.

Sensitising men

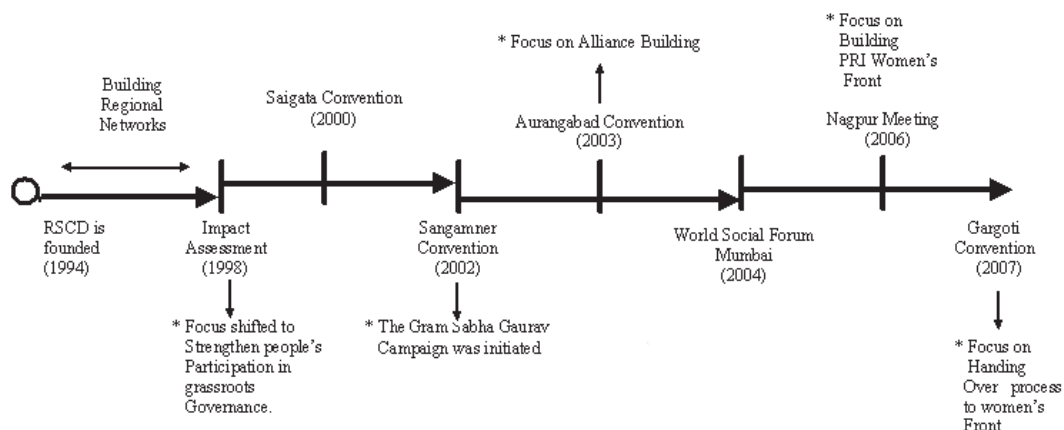
Another strategy used to counter local resistance is to associate male sympathisers with the MRA process. Support from men is hard to achieve unless they are convinced that women are equal members of society and have been disadvantaged historically. Reservation for women is just one of the mechanisms to address this injustice being done to women so far. MRA has carried out the Jotiba Jagruti Abhiyaan, which is a way to create a men's support group for women's initiatives. The Abhiyan is aimed at identifying and creating opportunities for men to support and help women leaders.

Similarly, support from the family is very crucial for elected women to continue in politics and to effectively carry out their work. MRA also promotes positive role

models. A family appreciation letter or *Kutumb Sanman Patra* is presented to families who respect and support women’s activism. This certificate has helped in increasing the support from family members.

In order to enhance the confidence of newly elected women and earn them community acceptance MRA also organises a public programme to felicitate newly elected members. This is often an important step towards building an enabling environment for women representatives.

The grassroots action has thus evolved and widened at several levels. As a result of these consistent local level attempts, MRA is now being viewed as a forum for justice and equality. On the positive side, involvement of village women in local decision-making processes has increased considerably. Women approach elected women representatives (EWRs) with several issues, which are governance related as well as other. Therefore EWRs are taking up women-related cases such as violence, dowry, rape, atrocities on dalit women and even general issues like the public distribution system, water, health, and so on. All this has helped to make local government institutions more functional and accountable to people and their lives.



4

State level action

Apart from the village and taluka level activities, MRA also organised state level programmes, such as conventions and seminars, for women to come together and share their experiences. State level programmes have been organised to consolidate the grassroots processes and plan future strategies of the collective. State level programmes, especially MRA conventions, have also helped to broaden the scope of MRA work and build strategic linkages to ascertain wider impact. Thus field level action is very well supported by active state level processes. These various state level activities include:

- **MRA State Conventions**, which have helped to consolidate grassroots processes and transfer of ownership and leadership.
- **Dissemination of relevant information** from time to time to strengthen grassroots action. Several publications have been produced for proper and timely dissemination of information. Publications are also produced to share MRA work and achievements and generate wider debate and support.
- **Policy advocacy** has remained one of the strongest areas of work at the state level. Media advocacy also has been done effectively. State level action also includes lobbying with political parties on specific issues and alliance building.

The process of state level initiatives, including MRA conventions, shows how the movement has graduated and consolidated its action in a forceful manner:

- **Saigata Convention** in March 2000. Presented charter of women's demands, initiated collective process of MRA and motivated women's participation in Gram Sabha meetings and Gram Panchayat elections.
- **Sangamner Convention** in June 2001. Self-help group members played a key role in organising the event. Women's initiative in the convention was noteworthy. The convention decided to take up Gram Sabha awareness campaign and also decided to initiate MRA's Gav Shakha, or village unit, as a support mechanism for elected women.

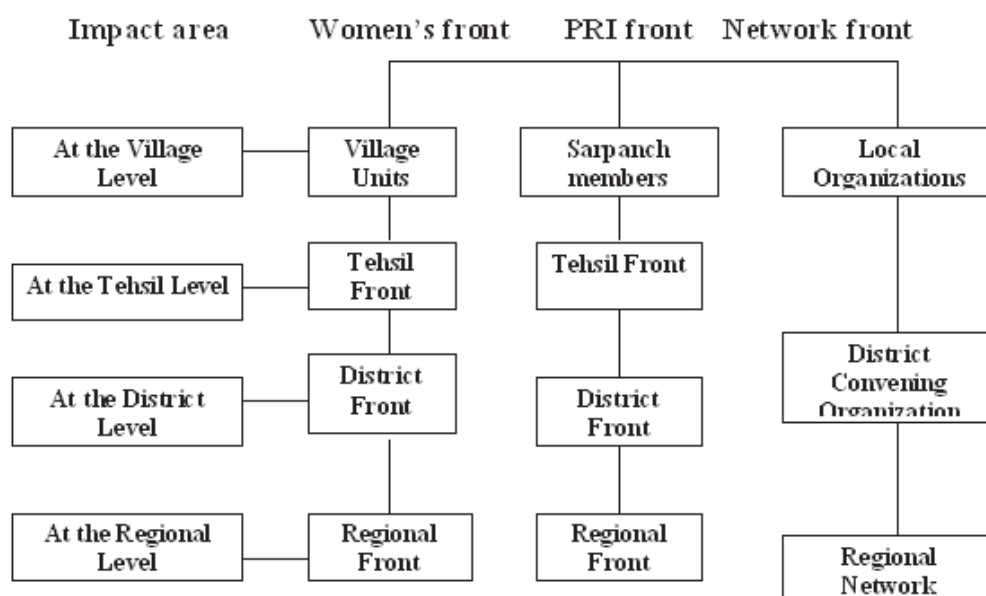
- **Aurangabad Convention** in June 2002. MRA explored possible linkages and alliance building of women in governance with other critical issues, such as livelihood issues, violence against women and fundamentalism.
- At the **World Social Forum** in Mumbai in January 2004, over 100 women leaders from across the state actively participated to share their experiences and concerns in a global forum.
- An **International Dialogue** meet took place in Pune in June 2005, with delegates associated with the Hunger Project from USA and Bangladesh. This meet was helpful in bringing forward challenges faced by elected women. A collective reflection process took place to take stock of strategies, structures and alliances made by MRA to meet these challenges.
- **Strategy building** to develop PRI women's front finalised in Nagpur 2006
- The latest state convention in **Gargoti** (district Kolhapur), in March 2007, initiated the handing over process to the women's front.

Structure of MRA

Today MRA is working in 26 districts, 78 blocks, has 4 regional networks, with 175 organisations, and 40 grassroots women leaders. The regional networks are: (a) Vidarbha Lok Vikas Manch (VLVM), Nagpur & Amrawati region (b) Marathwada Lok Vikas Manch (MLVM) for Marathwada region (c) Janpath Vikas Manch (JVM) for Western Maharashtra region and (d) Some parts of Konkan region. Almost 1800 EWRs are directly associated in MRA process, as members of MRA's Gav Shakha and PRI Women's Front.

The present structure of MRA, responsible for coordinating state and grassroots action has evolved through a process of democratic dialogue. One of the striking findings of a review carried out in 2005 was the lack of adequate representation of women in state level decision making processes. The review team commented that though MRA seeks to become a women-led process, it is still very much an NGO-led process. As women's leadership grows stronger, grassroots women should become a legitimate part of the overall decision making process. The MRA team organised a strategy planning meeting in Nagpur in 2006 and planned its future course of action in the light of the review findings. The meeting decided to make a drastic change in the structure in order to involve emerging women leaders in the state level decision making. MRA developed a village to state level structure and has also formed a state level executive committee, giving priority to women's representation. The following charts show the present structure and composition of the state execution committee, which has been functional since December 2006.

MRA Structure



State executive committee is representative body of these units at various levels as stated below:

Representatives of District organisers -	4
Regional Organisers -	4
Campaign Facilitators -	5
Sarpanch representatives of PRI Women's Front -	4
Network Conveners -	4
State Convener -	1
Total members -	22 (14 women and 8 men)

Alliance building

Reaching out and forming alliances with other like-minded groups has remained one of the integral strategies in order to initiate and build effective advocacy processes on several issues of concern. Since active alliances provide a broader collection of skills and enrich capacities to address issues at hand, MRA believe in the formation of alliances though formal structures, unless necessary, have been avoided. MRA views alliance building as a disciplined effort to create a chain of change agents that can shape and guide various campaigns and actions. The alliance building

process has taken place at state as well as regional and district levels.

Planned Alliances have been formed with organisations that are closely associated with issues of grassroots governance and are involved in regional level action plans as well. These include NGOs like the Dr P V Mandlik Trust, Sampark, Rationing Kriti Samittee and government/semi-government programmes like Maharashtra Rural Credit Project (MRCP) and Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal (MAVIM).

Supportive Alliances have been formed with organisations and networks that are playing a crucial role in extending support and solidarity from time to time and contributed with their specific areas of expertise. These include NGOs like Aalochana, YASHADA, Indian Centre for Human Rights and Laws, Aveshi, National Centre for Advocacy Studies (NCAS) and so on. MRA is also in the process of identifying **Potential Alliances** for effective work and these include networks and organisations who are taking up broader issues of gender and caste discrimination and sustainable livelihood. These include Anganwadi Worker's Union, AFARM and so on. Apart from these state level alliance partners, regional level MRA units are also part of collective struggles specific to their region.

Information dissemination and media advocacy

The state unit has efficiently facilitated sharing of information and experiences through various publications. Key information, such as government resolutions, procedures and schemes etc have been popularised in various ways, which has helped in their execution. MRA special Diwali issue *Rajsattetya Karbharni* very sensitively documents experiences as well as concerns of women leaders within and outside MRA. MRA recognises the potential of the media in giving visibility to EWR issues and has therefore motivated several journalists to write on these issues. MRA has popularised the Sarojini Naidu Puraskar in Maharashtra, which is presented every year. The collective has also made use of mainstream media for dissemination of information and to raise critical issues.

Percentage Raj

On December 28, 2002, Vimal Shirsath was elected sarpanch. For the first time in Babulgaon's history, a woman, that too from the dalit community, became the sarpanch. Not surprisingly, male egos were hurt. In the beginning she was under tremendous pressure from the heap of applications and complaints. She wondered why so many applications were pending. What are the real issues that concern people? She started studying all this and started working for village development. She observed that in the last 50 years, the Gram Sabha had taken place only on paper never in reality. People were unaware of what a Gram Sabha was or when it should be called.

Vimal Shirsath started holding Gram Sabhas. To make people aware about the Gram Sabha she used the medium of the "davandi" (public call). She believed that the Gram Panchayat is the platform for both villagers and the Gram Panchayat body to raise problems as well as discuss remedies and development work. Along with the Gram Panchayat secretary, she started giving information to the people about government welfare schemes. People found this very helpful and soon began respecting and supporting her in her work. She saw to it that people participated on a large scale in village governance.

Politicians in the village didn't like this. It was difficult for them to digest that a woman from the dalit community was getting ahead. From here the 'Percentage Raj' started. They joined hands with opposition members in the Gram Panchayat and started demanding commission on all work done by the panchayat. Vimal Shirsath opposed this very strongly. As a result, a no-confidence motion was brought against her. But it failed because of the good work she had done. She implemented various schemes for village development. The main problem of the village was a shortage of water. She solved this problem by installing hand pumps in the village. She sanctioned a separate water line for the dalit colony. Streetlights were installed, public toilets and a drainage system were constructed, and land was given for construction of houses for landless villagers.

5

Organisation-building process

MRA's inception lies in the initiative taken by a network of NGOs. Though it initially started as a project to empower elected women representatives and strengthen their governance roles in Panchayati Raj, it was conceived as a collective process and a movement that had grassroots women as its main stakeholders. MRA has gradually shifted from project mode to process mode, keeping women and their leadership at the core. With experience and newer insights, the work process has systematically led to building of an organisation of women. The organisation building was viewed as essential to transfer ownership to women and also to sustain change processes MRA has taken up.

The need for organisation building of women was deemed necessary so as to overcome the limitations of NGOs in taking part in local politics. NGOs being outside agencies have a limited role to play in village-level governance processes. Though they can facilitate and support local women, they themselves are not able to play any active part in governance. It was therefore necessary to empower women themselves to do this. Very often women get strength from a collective identity, which works as a pressure group. Thus, as more and more women and women's groups became active at the local level, it prepared the ground for the required role-reversal. Consequently, women's groups took a lead role and NGOs and networks took a back seat, providing support as and when required.

In the state level convention in Sangamner in 2001, this need to initiate the organisation building process was voiced for the first time. The convention also passed a resolution and decided to form village level units of MRA. Soon after the convention, active women's groups started setting up these village units or *gav shakas*. It took three years to form and activate MRA *gav shakhas* in all the work areas. Village level units were viewed as a forum of all women as against the SHGs, which can encompass only its own members and has a specific agenda. The MRA unit became a forum to take up critical issues of governance and a pressure group to address women's concerns. Each unit has a head and an executive body who take responsibility to keep the unit active and vibrant. The existence of a *gav shakha* is made known to the public by putting up a board, preferably at the

entrance to the village, just like political groups usually do. The *gav shakha* collects a nominal membership fee from its members, which is used for local activities. These units have played an important role during elections by supporting women candidates and also in strengthening Gram Sabha meetings.

Recently, a format for all programmes was decided to maintain uniformity in conducting activities and building a collective spirit among different units. For instance, local programmes begin and end with a particular song highlighting the MRA vision and demands; sloganeering and oath-taking is done to reiterate commitment. Women members proudly wear MRA badges and identity cards, and paying respect to social champions Jotiba Phule, and Savitribai and Babasaheb Ambedkar is an integral part of the programme. The formation of these *gav shakhas* can be considered as the beginning of MRA as an organisation.

Over time, large numbers of women who were not elected representatives became actively associated with the MRA process. *Gav shakhas* became a collective unit to address all gender and caste concerns of their members. For instance, women had their own agenda of gender, domestic violence, child marriage etc, which could be discussed and addressed at these village forums. All these village units combined to become a strong state-level front of women active in micro as well as macro level issues of gender and caste discrimination.

The state women's front or MRA organisation has primarily focused its energies at three levels:

- Increasing membership and strengthening the organisation
- Building awareness among women to empower them by realising their potential and minimising their dependency
- Asserting for a political space and political identity.

At present, there are 285 MRA *gav shakhas* with a membership exceeding 12,000 women.

Panchayat Raj Women's Front

MRA realised that elected women representatives have specific needs, apart from the gender and caste specific needs that they share with other women. Field experience indicated the several critical problems faced by EWRs, ranging from illiteracy to harassment by local power holders, which needed to be addressed systematically. Here also MRA felt the need to build up the confidence of EWRs through information and knowledge-sharing and skill enhancement and also to create a support group of EWRs. This idea was debated for some time and in 2006, at a meeting in Nagpur, MRA decided to form a separate front of elected women to exclusively focus on issues of concern to them. Thus the Panchayat Raj Women's

Front was formed at the level of each taluka to facilitate organisation building of EWRs, to enhance their confidence and capacity to work, and to build political awareness and knowledge.

At present, 1800 elected women representatives are part of 89 taluka level Panchayat Raj Women's Fronts.

Towards New Paths

Archana Jatkar was elected as the sarpanch of the Pokhari Gram Panchayat in September 2006. When she assumed office, the situation of the Pokhari Gram Panchayat was very gloomy. Gram Sabhas were never held in the village; traditional power holders and local leaders had the upper hand in the haphazard decision-making process in the village, and women were apprehensive about participating in public meetings. Archana decided that her first task was to activate the Gram Sabha and elicit women's participation in the developmental work of the village.

She called for a women's meeting at her own house. However, she received a very poor response, with only 10-12 women showing up. Archanatai did not give up and initiated a dialogue with the women, urged them to come forward and contribute for the development of their own village, hoping to ignite a sense of ownership in them. Her efforts paid off when the number of women attending the next meeting surged to 70. It was at this meeting that Archanatai put forth the idea of forming women self-help groups (SHGs). The idea was so appealing and participation of women so active, that within three days eight women SHGs with a membership of 15 each were formed.

The village had a severe water crisis to which the menfolk had turned a deaf ear. When Archanatai appealed to the people to help her implement the water supply scheme in the village, some men opposed her. She called a meeting of the SHGs and suggested that they contribute to the building of a well in the village. Her suggestion was readily accepted and each SHG contributed Rs 2000. Archanatai appealed for contributions from other people in the village and women were at the forefront here too. Women working as daily labourers and earning a meagre Rs 25-30 per day, came forward and contributed whatever they could afford. As a result, enough money was collected to dig the well.

The site chosen for the well was near the river. The first instalment under the Water Supply Scheme reached in time and with the help of the money collected by the villagers the first phase of digging the well went off smoothly. However, the second instalment under the scheme was delayed and the work of the well was stalled. However, the Village Cleanliness and Water Supply Committees came forward in support and assured that they would work day and night to see that the work continued. But money was a problem so Archanatai decided to shell out money from her own pocket. Within a month, the well was ready and the village was relieved of the long water crisis it had suffered. The second instalment came only two months later!

While ensuring the development of the entire village, Archanatai consciously worked for the deprived sections of the village. The dalit settlement in the village often experienced water clogging. Therefore, the work of widening the gutters was undertaken.

Archanatai also discovered that the previous panchayat had been corrupt; it had taken Rs 5000 from a widow and promised her a house under the Indira Awas Yojana. However, after they lost the elections, they backed out and she was duped of her money. The widow came to Archanatai for help. Archanatai took her to the Panchayat Samiti office. The former gram sevak and former sarpanch, who had misled the widow, warned Archnatai that "good women do not go to Panchayat Samiti office." But Archanatai did not relent and stopped only when the widow received her dues.

Another of her achievements was making crop loans available to farmers at a low interest of 1%. The district being a part of the Vidarbha region that has had the highest number of farmer suicides, these loans have been of real help to the burdened farmers.

6

Impact and Challenges

The impact of MRA is visible at various levels. First and most obviously, on the women who have been actively involved in MRA processes at the village, and other, levels. Active village level units have been able to take up several local concerns and the impact can be seen on women's collective level. Inputs and support to EWRs and their organisation-building has led to changes in the local decision making processes and Gram Panchayat functioning.

Impact at individual level among MRA members: MRA has succeeded in developing the leadership abilities of its members. Exposure and capacity building through various activities has led to enhanced understanding, a positive attitude and a sense of solidarity among the women. Thus empowerment is visible in terms of:

- Increased self-confidence and self-esteem in EWRs and rural women
- Increased leadership qualities
- Greater acceptance of women as leaders in the society
- Improved status in family and society
- Increased awareness and motivation level of EWRs

Impact at panchayat/governance level: Informed and active participation of MRA members in Gram Panchayat functioning has led to a change in existing stereotypes. A pro-people approach and transparent functioning is integral in executing development work through various government schemes. The impact is also visible at the level of Gram Sabha/Mahila Sabha and these public forums have been activated. Most importantly, emphasis on value-based politics is reflected in day to day functioning. The changed nature of panchayat functioning can be seen in terms of:

- Increased social accountability and transparency in local village affairs
- Successful implementation of government schemes by the EWRs like Gadge Maharaj Village Cleanliness Campaign, Indira Awas Yojana, Public Distribution System, Antyodaya Scheme, Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana,

Employment Guarantee Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, etc.

- Using PRIs to address a variety of issues affecting women - rape, sexual harassment, dowry, inadequacies of government structures

Impact at the level of women's collectives: The process of empowerment is not limited to governance issues alone and can be seen in the manner in which strategic gender issues are addressed. On various occasions MRA has taken up issues like household work, right to property and joint ownership of household, and also made efforts to bring alcohol abuse and domestic violence onto the agendas of political campaigns. Conscious attempts have been made to sensitise and involve men as partners in the social change process. Problem of gender discrimination and violence against girls has been raised through mass awareness campaigns organised every year from November 25 to December 10 - a fortnight dedicated to empowerment of women against violence. The impact of MRA work on women's collectives can be seen in various areas such as:

- SHGs acting as a base for uniting women for mass actions
- Strengthening of women SHGs
- Challenging patriarchal - stereotypical roles of women
- Challenging the established traditional power centres
- Collective ownership towards the issues of development
- Good knowledge of social issues and comprehending their inter linkages
- Good rapport with various stakeholders
- Increasing understanding about caste - class - gender power relations
- Priorities of development in favour of vulnerable - women, dalits and tribals
- Dalit women emerging as active participants with strong leadership qualities.

Impact at the policy level: In order to create an enabling policy environment, MRA has consistently raised critical demands and succeeded in making positive changes at the policy level. These include:

- Conferring effective powers on Gram Sabhas, December 2002.
- Mandatory women's Gram Sabhas
- State government has accepted MRA's demand to make suitable amendments to resolve the issue of suspended Gram Sabha
- Block development officers (BDOs) are advised to give adequate publicity to taluka meetings to ensure participation by women
- Three-fourth majority is made mandatory to unseat women sarpanchs through no-confidence motions, thus putting a check on improper and

gender biased use of this statutory provision

- The state government has agreed to implement Gram Sevikas on an experimental basis.
- Ten percent budget for women to be implemented rigorously
- Priority given to mahila mandals for allocation of land by government committees is to be extended to other committees as well
- A resolution stating that flag-hoisting should necessarily be done by elected women sarpanches.

Challenges

Though tangible gains have been made at various levels, as presented above, MRA still faces critical challenges. There is always the possibility of a backlash whenever women assert themselves. Women's collective action faces the threat of a severe reaction in the form of verbal and physical abuse. Such instances are many, though very few become known. This is the fourth phase of Panchayati Raj in Maharashtra and the nature of the challenges has changed over this period. Some of the major challenges before the elected women representatives include:

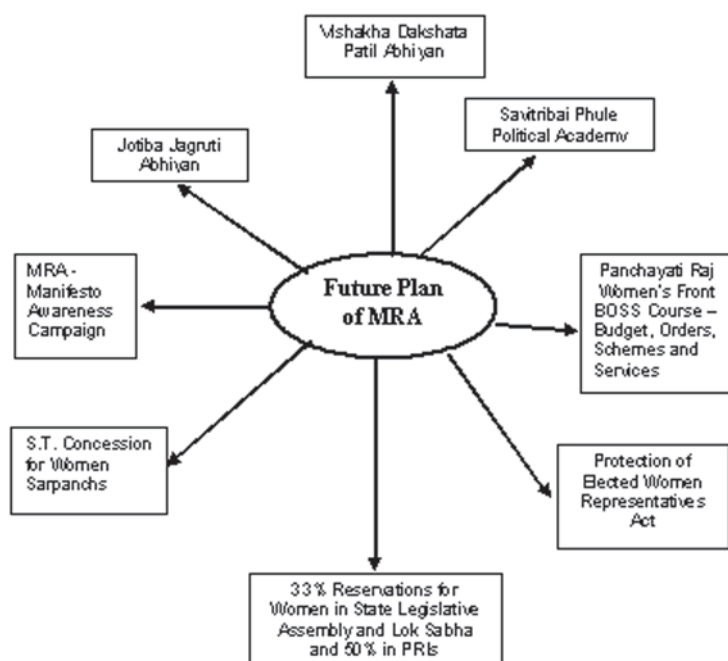
- Pressure to stick to traditional roles
- Increased expectations of the people to make changes and prove one's capabilities
- Lack of co-operation from men in the community and in the administration
- Pressure from political parties
- Value-less politics riddled with corruption, alcohol, and muscle power
- Changing political, social, cultural and economic scenario due to the onslaught of globalisation, privatisation, liberalisation
- Lack of resources and livelihoods for disadvantaged and discriminated sections.

Clearly these challenges demand invigorated collective action. In this context MRA is planning to sustain the collective processes already set in place and strengthen them by accommodating new actors in the social change process. For instance, MRA is planning to involve rural youth in their programmes and to form a youth front that will work hand in hand with other MRA fronts.

7

Way Ahead

The following diagram explains the future course of action chalked out by MRA to consolidate its gains and to meet future challenges. MRA has planned campaigns to widely propagate its ideology (MRA Manifesto Awareness Campaign), to address the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace in the context of Panchayati Raj (Vishakha Dakshata Patil Abhiyan) and to sensitise men (Jotiba Jagruti Abhiyan). MRA also plans to strengthen the Panchayat Raj Women's Front by increasing membership and enhancing specific capacities like budget planning and utilisation. One of its ambitious plans is setting up the Savitribai Phule Political Academy, which will be an institute offering need-based courses for EWRs to enhance their knowledge and perspective building.



At the policy level, MRA plans to pursue the demand for travel concessions for women sarpanches in state transport, which would particularly help sarpanches from marginalised and poor sections of society. MRA also supports the demand for a special Act to provide protection to EWRs against violence, and one-third reservations for women in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies. Following the precedent of Madhya Pradesh, MRA would also like to push for 50% reservation for women in local governing institutions.

At the process level, MRA plans to ensure sustainability by seeking resources from communities and sympathisers. For instance, it is envisaged that district level units would run their activities through resources raised through membership fees and local contributions and donations. The idea of the Karbharni Fellowship is devised to raise sponsorship for elected women representatives from working women in urban areas. These ideas are still at a very nascent stage; however, they certainly have the potential to widen the resource and support base for the struggle spearheaded by grassroots women leaders.