The Complexities of Empowering Rural Indian Women

(A story of Indian Panchayats)

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Abstract:

In the following research I strive to focus on the various aspects that influence the ‘empowerment’ issue of rural Indian women. I refer to two governmental reforms in particular - the historic ‘Women’s Reservation Bill’ (WRB) which insists on a one third participation of women at the lower tier of political structure in India called the Panchayats and the controversial ‘Two Child Norm’ (TCN) which restricts political participation of both men and women Panchayat candidates if the couple chooses to have more that two children (Buch, 2005).

I spread my research over a variety of social actors relevant to this issue and use Kabeer’s (1999) three-dimensional model of dissecting empowerment that analyzes the term at an intrinsic level. It is revealed through this research and analysis that in spite of the government’s efforts through the WRB reform of providing resources to the rural women toward economic and social empowerment through political participation, the power terrains of caste, culture and religion withhold their agency. On the other hand, the tainted TCN stipulation, which in some cases has proved detrimental to women, has also shown signs of being helpful in determining the intrinsic aspect of empowerment like gaining a voice in terms of reproductive rights.

Such findings however bring into focus the government’s lack of commitment and foresight in designing such reforms and hence this research helps us locate the sites of development to make the term ‘empowerment’ more meaningful.

Tags:
Empowerment, Feminism, Women, Gender, Equality, Rural, India, Development, Reforms, Intrinsic, Reproductive Rights, Citizenship
Relevance to C4D:

French scholar Rosanvallon (2008, 2011) sketches out the evolution and the transformation of democratic systems as a continuous communicative activity. He describes “the constellation of state, public, civic agencies and actors, which scrutinize government and its actions to prevent abuses of power and allow intervention to be able to question their policies and reforms” (ibid). Actors such as the opposition parties which plays the role of monitoring the ruling party, or the court that acts as the buffer to protect the citizens against legislative and executive inadequacies and the playing field then opens up to journalism, civil society, ombudsman, academics, lobby groups and such which act on behalf and in the interests of citizens thereby enhancing the responsiveness of democratic systems (ibid). Hence, a democratic system according to Rosanvallon (2008) “embodies a diversity of views, which can be expressed through political participation in a variety of ways”. Mouffe (2005) explains this participation as the “political agency, which often involves struggle” and as Dahlgren (2009) further explains that “democracy is ultimately anchored in the cultural patterns of a society, in its values, assumptions, and social differences”. Democracy is fundamentally about participation and participation is about power sharing as explained by Dahlgren (2013) “hence any type of participation that is systematically undermined should be severely scrutinized”. There are a variety of C4D definitions however Servaes consolidates the term broadly to refer to all the different types of communication that need to take place in societies if sustainable democratic development is to occur (Servaes, 2008). The 2006 World Congress on Communication for Development defined C4D as ‘a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods (ibid). My research here loosely addresses this spectrum of actors and the communication and power dynamics that are attached to democracy and political participation. It especially refers to the issue of ‘womens empowerment’ and analyses what the term connotes versus what the brazen policies of government render it to be.
Glossary:
(Common Terms & Abbreviations)

Panchayat: Lower tier of governance in India
Gram Panchayat: Village level politics
Taluka Panchayat: Municipal level politics
Jilla Panchayat: District level politics
Panch: Member of Panchayat
Sarpanch: Leader of Panchayat
TCN: Two-Child Norm
THP: The Hunger Project
ISS: Institute of Social Sciences
WRB: Women’s Reservation Bill
Lok Sabha: Lower House of the Parliament
Rajya Sabha: Upper House of the Parliament
MP: Member of Parliament
MLA: Member of Legislative Assembly
NPP: National Population Policy
SCJ: Supreme Court Judgement
PIL: Public Interest Litigation

The usage of the unit “Crore” in India is equivalent to 10 million internationally.

Schedule Tribe, Schedule Castes, Backward Communities, Adivasi, Dalit: These are different levels of the various downtrodden community caste systems in India, which maybe overall referred to as downtrodden communities or more specifically in some cases.
Radhiabai came to Chukdabi village (Madhya Pradesh) eighteen years ago as a twelve-year-old bride. In February 2005 when she took pledge for the post of Sarpanch, for the first time she realized the curse of being illiterate. At that time in her village an unorganised structure of a primary school existed of 285 students with only three teachers. During her tenure of service as a Sarpanch she made it her mission to change this. Under Radhiabai’s supervisio, a decent school structure with seven rooms and nine teachers was constructed to ensure 80% student attendance with strict observance of rules of teaching and learning. She thereafter continued her efforts toward constructing a secondary school especially for the girls of the village, so they didn’t have to travel far for further studies.

Phulamabai from Adivasi tribal region in Amaravati district (Maharashtra) got married when she was 16. She has four children. She had worked as a labourer since her childhood. In 2004 she was the first from her tribe to be elected as a Sarpanch. Phulamabai is known for her work in mobilizing women through Self Help Groups. Moreover, she has managed to complete unfinished projects of building water drainage canals and cement roads. To solve the severe water crisis she was instrumental in getting a sanction to dig a bore well followed up by construction of water tanks. She has also implemented a housing scheme project for the below poverty line families in surrounding villages.

Excerpts from a compilation of women stories (Chaudhuri, 2008)
1. Background:

This section will give you an overall backdrop of the subject of this research and towards the end of this section it will outline the direction of inquiry with a specific research question, which we strive to explore through this paper.

1.1 Uplifting the marginalized:

India is a country of immense diversity with a range of cultures, languages and ethnicities spread across 28 states. It has deep-rooted hierarchies in terms of castes and gender. Approximately half of India’s population consists of dalits, tribals and other marginalised communities. The Independent India in 1948 strived toward uplifting the socially and economically challenged through opportunities in politics and employment and encouraging the agrarian community through self-reliance, an ideology based on Gandhi’s ‘Swaraj’ (self-governance) dream (Eriksen, 2002). In 1989 rural India was granted power of self-governance by introducing the gram (village), Taluka (municipality) and Jilla (district) Panchayat (politics). By 1990’s radical quota systems were introduced through various reforms to mainstream these marginalised communities. According to latest figures, 49.5% of political and public sector jobs belong to these marginalised communities (Eriksen, 2002). Two-thirds of the Indian population resides in the rural; hence the redistribution of power and the decentralization policy authorizes the individual state governments to devolve power and resources to the grassroots political tiers of Panchayats. However, not all states have been generous to entrust all the powers to the grassroots; only 4 out of 28 states have taken the decentralization policy seriously (Manor, 2010) by granting the grassroots both administrative and financial powers. State governments normally expect the Panchayats to take care of administration but keep the majority financial control at higher levels. Economic and cultural differences are stark between various states and differ significantly from one village to another within a state. Hence, the implications of national policies are inconsistent across the nation. Nevertheless, the impetus is on participation and upliftment, where capability takes a backseat and equality is at the vanguard of the national agenda. Such an ideology however takes many different forms at the grassroots, as we will observe through this research.
1.2 Equality for Women:

“Our blessings are with you, child. You will get a baby boy as your first child.”
When an old woman blessed me thus, Mayil Aatha chided her.

“Why are you blessing her with a baby boy. Let her have a girl child. Only a girl child has the strength to fight for justice until she succeeds.”
She hugged me tightly amidst laughter and mirth.

Jothishmi’s (2007) concluding comments from her memoirs of becoming a Sarpanch

The above-mentioned quote cuts across both urban and rural patriarchal attitudes in India (THP representative). Preference for a boy child is deeply embedded in the Indian culture. With a population of nearly one billion, the country contributes to nearly one sixth of the world’s population. More importantly the 2001 census show a stark rise in favour of male in the child gender ratio (1000:927) (Gurung, 2004).

As an effort to empower women and recognize them as equal citizens, the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1992 introduced a historical reform, ‘the women’s reservation bill’ (WRB) which insists on a minimum one-third participation of women in Panchayats. However, in the same year ‘the two child norm’ (TCN) was introduced based on the exponential population growth recorded in the 1991 Census, which prevents both male and female candidates with more than two children from holding power in Panchayats (Buch, 2005). TCN is an optional state level stipulation that has been implemented only by some of the states, which perceive population as a problem. The reform was inspired by China’s ‘one child policy’, wherein the government grants incentives for those who follow the norm and exclude the ones, which does not follow the norm. However Indian democratic conditions do not allow enforcement of such a norm and hence it has manifested itself in a variety of repercussions, which has been especially detrimental to women thereby repudiating the original purpose of WRB’s intent for empowering women (ibid).
1.3 People vs Reforms:

The basic intention of the WRB reform was to challenge the traditional patriarchal structures and was conceived in favour of women’s political, economic and social empowerment (Buch, 2005). On the other hand, TCN is a state level stipulation amongst 11 other optional (for the state to choose) stipulations such as minimum literacy or adequate hygiene conditions e.g. a toilet. TCN was devised to construct the local Panchayat leaders into ‘social models’ who may be able to set an example for their communities to have fewer children (Visaria et al, 2006). The reform is applicable only to the younger generation with a cut-off date, depending on when the state adopted the norm. The intention of the reform was also to be able to break the vicious cycle of multiple Pregnancies – Poverty – Powerlessness (ibid).

Based on researches conducted by various NGOs and academics such as Buch (2005), Visaria et al (2006), Rai (2007) and Cole (2009) with a number of women Panchayat leaders across many Indian states, there has been evidence that a majority of women who attain under WRB the Panchayat reserved seats are by proxy whereas in reality their husbands or other male relatives take charge and exercise power (Buch, 2009). However, there are many other examples of women’s growing self-confidence and heroic tales of hard work and leadership struggles (ibid). TCN reform according to some academics helps to dislodge the deeply embedded socio cultural patriarchal attitudes (Visaria et al, 2006). Nevertheless, the implications of the TCN in some states like Rajasthan and Orissa have been especially detrimental for women in a society with a heavy preference of male child. Men abandon their wives (accusing them of adultery) and newborn girls to hold on to their Panchayat positions, an increase in female foeticide and declining gender ratio are some of the other repercussions (Buch, 2005). Visaria et al (2006) notes the lack of awareness of the norm itself and hence disqualifications are based on complaints from rivals (from upper caste) as part of a political game played to settle scores often based on caste differences. Besides, in some states the inadequate support from healthcare clinics and lack of contraceptive resources turn such a reform into a hydra-headed problem.
Aim and Research Question:

My intention in this thesis is to take a look at the empowerment issue of women through the case study of WRB reform and TCN stipulation - especially in terms of how deeply embedded socio-cultural transformations are possible. And discuss what impediments lie within the society to realize such lofty developmental goals of equality. To be able to achieve this I attempt to dig deeper into the concept of empowerment and develop an in-depth understanding of the intrinsic components of the term toward asking a specific question through this research,

“Can the government’s effort to give the rural Indian women a voice in the public sphere enable them to find a voice in matters related to social and reproductive rights in the private sphere?”

The above research question is comparing the subject of empowerment on two levels - public and private. The suggestive extrinsic value of empowerment in the above question is indicated through their roles as women leaders and the intrinsic value is especially indicated through their roles in choosing the gender and number of children they want to have. There are many other intrinsic and extrinsic parameters to gauge empowerment such as their choice of husband, their rights to property or their role in decision making concerning children’s health, education etc. However, in the context of the reforms, I limit my research to the issue of political participation and reproductive rights.

To be able to gain an in-depth understanding of what the term empowerment means and how can we gauge its intrinsic aspects, I would like to use the theoretical hypothesis developed by Naila Kabeer, a Bangladeshi social economist scholar and writer. She works primarily on poverty, gender and social policy issues.
2. Theoretical Framework:

This section throws light on philosophical inclinations of this research upon which I base my analytical hypothesis of the central term ‘empowerment’. I also summarize the overall literature references that have been relevant to my findings to understand the various aspects in this thesis such as feminism, culture and ethnicity.

2.1 Empowerment:

Women’s empowerment can be broadly defined as, “the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 1999). Hence, in effect the concept is tied in with the condition of disempowerment, thereby describing itself as a process of change (ibid).

Developmental goals often scratch the surface regarding women’s empowerment by addressing issues of welfare and basic needs, but seldom address advocacy, which argues for these goals in intrinsic terms (ibid). Kabeer (1999) describes the term ‘empowerment’ as a “zero-sum game with politically weak winners and powerful losers”. In the case of the rural Indian women it is important for the policy makers to understand the term both in terms of power and social justice to circumvent the brazenness of their policies. Poverty and disempowerment are logically related since the lack of basic needs beats the concept of choice. Furthermore, not all choices are about fulfilling basic needs; some strategic choices have a greater significance toward leading lives such as social or reproductive choices (who they want to marry or if they want to have children) (ibid). Empowerment is hence not merely a process of change in terms of welfare but also a process of expanding the range of such strategic life choices. Some NGOs prefer the fuzziness of the concept of empowerment to allow a certain breathing space instead of clearly defined objectives. Nevertheless, to analyze ‘women’s empowerment’ in the context of this thesis it maybe prolific to follow Kabeer’s (ibid) instrumentalist model with three interrelated dimensions of the term,

I. Resources – this dimension refers to not only the economic resources but also the social resources that improve the ability to exercise choice. These are the rules and norms (allocative or authoritative) that give priority and enable women special privileges (Giddens, 1979). For example excess to free
education for girls or anti-dowry laws.

II. Agency – with reference to power, agency can be explained in the positive sense as the ‘power to’ which is the capacity of a woman to make a choice irrespective of unfavorable conditions. On the other hand it can also manifest itself in a negative way as ‘power over’ which can be through manipulation, negotiation, deception or coercion. However, certain social norms in India such as ‘arranged marriages’ wherein the parents choose the spouse of their children, is an example of how power can operate due to lack of an explicit agency (Lukes, 1974).

III. Achievements – the combination of availability of resources and exercising agency to make the choices in their lives is what can result in empowerment in the true sense of the word (Sen, 1985b). On the other hand if women fail to make the desired choice due to a deep-seated constraint, it can be explained as disempowerment. However, if women adhere to existing norms and conditions due to individual preferences and priorities then the issue of power is irrelevant.

Hence, if the agenda of women’s empowerment is also about giving them an equal opportunity then it is important to understand the aspect of choice itself, which is central to empowerment. Choice in the equation of empowerment is relevant only if it benefits the person making this choice. The equation of power and choice however turns topsy-turvy when power and dominance function through consent (Kabeer, 1999). In patriarchal societies such as India as described in the previous section (Section 1.2, p.8) where men have assumed a dominant status, women tend to adapt a subordinate status by choice. Women in such societies not only undermine their own social status but also of other female family members. Such choices result in women’s secondary claims on household resources or willingness to satisfy husband’s preference for sons ignoring their own health and survival (ibid). This aspect of tradition and culture within which everyday life is conducted so that they become naturalized is what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as ‘doxa’. According to Bourdieu “doxa would continue to exist as long as subjective assessments of
social actors remain harmonious with objectively organized possibilities available to them” (ibid). Furthermore, he explains, “the passage from doxa to discourse (critical consciousness) only becomes possible when competing ways of ‘being and doing’ become available as material and cultural possibilities”. Thus, to be able to change this naturalized condition of social order it is vital to have the availability of alternatives at a discursive level, which helps them imagine the possibility of having chosen differently (ibid).

Thereby, to achieve empowerment it is crucial to determine if meaningful choices are made in the process of empowerment and if the possibility of a meaningful choice is available or was conceived within the realm of possibilities (ibid).

I would like to use the above theoretical model to discuss how the state’s efforts through certain reforms have impacted women’s empowerment in rural India. Additionally, I also reflect upon Batliwala’s (2010) critique on the term “empowerment” with reference to the WRB reform.

2.2 Literature Review:

In addition to Kabeer’s theoretical model, I look at a cross section of literature based on academic papers, journal and newspaper articles on researches conducted specific to the reforms of WRB and TCN such as Batliwala, Buch, Visaria, Dasgupta, Paul, Rai and published books by THP such as Jothimani’s memoirs and stories of the Dalit women ‘No Shortcut to Leadership’ and a compilation of media articles nominated for the Sarojini Naidu prize ‘Articles on Elected Women Leaders in Village Panchayats’. I compare my findings to the broad spectrum of available research through these materials. To get a grasp on feminist perspectives I refer to Lister’s ‘Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives’ and Mouffe’s ‘The Return of the Political’. I have also been inspired by the ideas of culture and ethnicity by Ericksen’s, ‘Ethnicity and Nationalism’ and Pieterse’s views on the cultural turn in ‘Developmental Theory’. Additionally I refer to Fairclough, Dijk and Creswell for literature on methodology.
3. Methodological Approach:

This section explains the ontological and the epistemological foundations on which the research methodology is based and justifies the choice of mixed methods approach toward gathering data. To ensure transparency, I would also like to explain/reflect on the methods of data collection and clarify the limitations of my research process.

3.1 Transformative Paradigm:

Mertens (2005, p.17) explains the emergence of the transformative paradigm with the realisation that other dominant research paradigms often developed sociological theories with a strong focus on male perspectives. The issues of social justice and marginalised communities were the focus for transformative researchers and hence they believed that a research inquiry should be intertwined with political agenda, and preferably with an action agenda such as a reform, which may help to transform the lives of these marginalised communities (Creswell, 2003, p.9). Since the paradigm calls for a holistic view of the social world through a cross section of perspectives and lenses, a mixed methods approach through qualitative data and analysis helps an overall understanding in terms of diversity, ethics and points of views (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p.275). This ideology fits with the research subject of this thesis wherein the purpose is to compare the objectives of government reforms with their repercussions and analyze them from a feminist stance.

3.2 Triangulation of Methodologies:

Based on the principles of transformative paradigm of research, I take a three-pronged approach toward collecting qualitative data through qualitative interviews and critical discourse analysis (Fig.1).

At a micro level I conduct two sets of qualitative interviews from two different villages in Gujarat through Skype with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire. The interviews are one-on-one with a woman Panchayat leader and a Panchayat member from the same village. These are in the category of Gram Panchayats, which means
the village level of politics. The description of a village according to the Indian census is a population of minimum 5000 people of which more than two-thirds of the communities are agrarians (Census, 2010). The key points of discussion of this interviews are toward understanding the extent of change in the lives of these women after assuming Panchayat positions, the extent of their participation in the office work, the resources available to them and ultimately their views on TCN in conjunction with personal reproductive preferences.

At the meso level I interview a male community member in each case to grasp his points of views regarding the same woman Panchayat leader I have interviewed. The discussion in this case is mostly about obtaining a male perspective to cross reference the data but also to get an overall picture of power relations in the community. Moreover, I also gather views through qualitative interviews from two representatives of the civil society,

a) A scholar-activist and Chairman from the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) known for its action-oriented work in research and advocacy especially with the Panchayats.

b) A representative of THP, an international NGO that works closely with the rural Indian populace with a focus on women’s empowerment.

The discussion with the civil society representatives is more specific to TCN reform, although it also helped to generate knowledge from their extensive experience in the field.

At the macro level I undertake critical discourse analysis (CDA) of texts from a 30-minute debate regarding the TCN reform in the parliament and the Supreme Court Judgment regarding TCN reform in favor of the State of Haryana. Minutes of both these documents were acquired through THP’s representative in Delhi.

This data is further dissected based on the analytical model of Kabeer (1999) as described earlier in Section 2.1 (p.11-13) which can be juxtaposed on the triangulation of methodologies as the three dimensions for analyzing the issue of women’s empowerment namely, resources, agency and achievement are intertwined.
within this social structure (Fig.1).

3.3 Methodological Preferences:

In this section I strive to explain the choice of methodologies, the subsequent theories attached to these preferences and the relevance of these choices to the subject of this research.

3.3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):

Wodak (1996) explains the emergence of CDA in the 1970s as a reaction to the then existing dominant paradigms, which were perceived largely asocial or uncritical. In consonance with the ideology of the transformative paradigm, which emphasizes the research to engage political agenda along with an action agenda, the perspective of CDA converges into theorizing both analysis and application through a range of different disciplines (Dijk, 2008). CDA focuses on the analysis of social hierarchies
and how dominance or inequalities are enacted reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context (ibid). The documents I propose to analyze and the questions I propose to ask fall in line with these goals, which makes CDA a lucrative methodology to use for this thesis. I propose to analyze two state level discourses, the Supreme Court Judgment and a Parliament debate, both of which fall in the genre of political discourse analysis. My questions are skewed toward a critical understanding of the level of commitment of the power holders toward the intent of their reforms (which in this case ideally should be women’s empowerment) and their suppleness when these reforms backfire (such as the case with TCN). These discourses are an important bridge toward understanding the micro and macro level of interactions in the social structure. Alexander et al (1987) explains that “everyday interaction and experience constitute the macro, the intermediate meso and the micro level of social interactions to form a unified whole”. Dijk (2008, p87) explains this further by giving an example of a racist speech in a parliament debate, which can be termed as a micro level interaction in the specific situation but has the potential to enact or become a constituent part of legislation toward reproduction of racism at the macro level. Fairclough’s (2010, p.94) CDA model has the potential to bridge this gap through a unified approach of analysis that converges the signifier’s use of language, the situational context and the socio-historic conditions leading to these processes. A critical look through this three dimensional approach helps us understand power dynamics which according to Essed (1991) “are not always exercised in obviously abusive acts of dominant group members, but may be enacted in myriad of taken-for-granted actions of everyday life, as is typically the case in the many forms of everyday sexist or racist behavior”.
Since the text in the SCJ document is extensive, I briefly incorporate Franzosi’s (1989) relational content analysis, which uses word count in relation with the actors and their actions toward analyzing precedence.

3.3.2 Qualitative Interviews:
As noted earlier in this section, transformative paradigm emphasizes on a range of perspectives on the research subject that helps to understand the layers of social structures (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p.275). Moreover, the three-dimensional
instrumental model proposed by Kabeer (1999) requires a considerable depth of analysis toward understanding the complexities in women’s ‘empowerment’ issue. Hence it was vital to obtain qualitative viewpoints of a cross section of social representatives, which can be cross-referenced to facilitate an overall meaning making (Alexander et al, 1987).

On one hand CDA gives us the macro level view, which is representative of the National and State level of political discourse. Whereas qualitative interviews can be used as a tool to drill deeper into the discursive structures of the society, which frame the world of ‘subjects’ as explained by Barbour & Schostak (2005, p. 43). The grassroots or the micro tier of ‘subjects’ is an important set of voices in my research considering the core issue of power to the marginalized. Nevertheless, it is important to make a note of the variety of interpretations and meanings that can be deducted with this methodology (ibid). Cross-referencing the analysis of these interviews juxtaposed with our knowledge of an overall cultural backdrop can help us form a more coherent picture of the social power dynamics.

All the interviews at the meso and micro level were face-to-face through Skype with the help of semi-structured and open-ended discussions to enable the participants to freely express themselves (Creswell, 2004). The questions were focused toward obtaining data to understand the three dimensions of ‘empowerment’ – resources, agency and achievement (Kabeer, 1999). The important cultural ingredient that was vital to be investigated within these discussions was the presence of ‘doxa’ (Bordieu, 1977). The perceptions of ‘doxa’ are often intrinsic and veiled between the lines and hence the qualitative method of interviewing which helps to interpret the ‘intent’ was extremely beneficial in this research (Creswell, 2009, p.189). Then again, the interpretations of the interviewer (me) as explained by Creswell (2009) based on my own experiences, culture and history play a significant role in the analysis.

3.4 Methods of Collecting Data:

All the interviews were recorded in video formats through consent of the interviewees and thereafter translated and transcribed by me. The duration of interviews ranged between 20-60 minutes. Interviews with the Sarpanch, Panchayat member and
community member were conducted in the local language (Gujarati). Qualitative interview with Dr. Mathew, ISS, Delhi was conducted through a Skype meeting by sending in advance an agenda of questions that I proposed to ask. The location was a formal setting as he spoke from his office desk. My interactions with THP representative were conducted via email. The information received from her is not privileged but she chooses to remain anonymous. Qualitative interviews with the first set of ‘Sarpanch - Woman Panchayat member - Male community member’ were conducted with the help of an assistant (a family member) based in India. She personally visited the village Matre in Gujarat and spent two days to organize the interviews by locating a place with Internet connection. She documented her visit by taking videos and pictures of the Panchayat office and its members when the Sarpanch was conducting her work, homes of all three participants, the living conditions of the village and other interesting happenings complete with her oral descriptions that she has generously shared with me. The interview with all three members was taken on a one-on-one basis from the home of the Panchayat member. All the participants were informed before hand regarding the subject of my research and my location (Sweden). Qualitative interviews for the second set of participants were also assisted in a similar manner by visiting the village Jabugam in Gujarat. She spent one day with the participants here but since it was a holiday for the Panchayat office, she could not document it’s functioning. The location chosen for Skype interviews in this case was at a neighbor’s house.

3.5 Reflections:
Long-distance qualitative interviews are not ideal for such a research, however it has helped me collect a cross-section of data, which may have been difficult to travel to physically in the given time and may not have been economically viable. The ease of language and my being a female were perhaps the two most vital factors in making these discussions qualitative. Moreover, the assistance of setting up these interviews through a local presence made it easier for all the participants including myself to be able to achieve a mutual level of understanding. However, I was informed that the Sarpanches in both the cases showed anxiety before the interviews. Their anxiety was
related to their positions and perhaps my location. One of the Sarpanches in her concluding remarks apologized for any mistakes or errors that she may have made during our discussion. The other Sarpanch prepared herself by bathing and adorning herself in a fancy attire for the interview as I learnt from my secondary source of information. Nevertheless they looked relaxed during my discussion with them. One of the members wanted to know where was I exactly located, where this country called Sweden is and found it surprising that I was married and that I had a child. I deduct from such questions that I was just as exotic to them as they were to me in spite of sharing the same language and nationality. My position in these interviews cannot be ignored and it is important to note that some of their answers may have been colored by their perception of me.

3.6 Limitations:
India is a diverse country and it should be taken into consideration that each state is very different in its own economic capacity and culture, which reflects on the issues of women’s empowerment directly. For example, my interviews were conducted in Gujarat, which is located in the Western part of India, which is comparatively more economically flourishing than Bihar (MOI, 2013). Hence the picture of a village in Gujarat looks very different from that of a village in Bihar. Moreover, the Northern states of India are more patriarchal in attitudes compared to the Southern India (Kabeer, 1999, p.443). A quick look at the female-to-male ratio on MOI (2013) indicates the difference between Kerala or Pondicherry located in South of India where female are more in numbers compared to male versus Haryana and Punjab located in North India wherein there are only 800 odd females in proportion to 1000 men. The religious customs vary in different ethnicities in terms of how women own properties or in terms of how they perceive birth control or abortions (Kabeer, 1999). These discussions hence cannot be fully covered in a half an hour Skype interview. I was also restricted by the unavailability of technology and by lack of resources to be able to conduct interviews in more than one state. Besides, the rural vernacular languages have played an important role in selection of interviewees. Hence the role of my qualitative research is more indicative and analytic rather than conclusive.
4. Data Analysis:

In the following section I would like to begin by analyzing two documents using Fairclough’s (2010) CDA model to get insights into the nuances underlying the entire political clamour regarding women’s empowerment and their intent regarding the TCN reform. SCJ for the State of Haryana gives us an idea of what is happening at the level of individual states and the Parliament debate transcript gives us an idea of what is happening amongst the politicians in the Centre. Furthermore, I analyse the transcripts of the qualitative discussions of two representatives from the civil society and two community male members to understand some aspects of the meso level discourse. At the micro level I analyze four interviews, one each from two different villages, of a Panch and a Sarpanch. A combination of this analysis will be discussed under the parameters of Kabeer’s (1999) three-dimensional model of empowerment in section 5.

4.1 Discourse Analysis

Fairclough’s (2010, p.94) model for ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ (CDA) has three interconnected processes, which are juxtaposed into three dimensions of a discourse. The model categorizes the dimensions of discourse as:

I. The object of analysis (such as verbal or visual texts)

II. The processes by means of which the object is produced and received (for example, written/spoken/read/listened/viewed) by human subjects.

III. The socio-historical conditions, which govern these processes.

Each of these dimensions is then further analyzed as text (description), process (interpretation) and social (explanation).

I would like to follow the above model of Fairclough to analyze the following documents, the questions that I strive to ask in the process are:

1. How the various actors in the political structure have reacted to the subject of women’s empowerment in the context of the TCN reform

2. What are the hidden communicational aspects of these debates such as power, patriarchy and preferences that can provide insights into the overall understanding of what equality means to them
The advantage of using Fairclough’s CDA model in answering the above questions is that it helps to focus on the signifiers that make up these texts and their specific linguistic selections. In the parliament debate document, these signifiers are the ‘ministers’ and in the Supreme Court Judgment (SCJ) document it is the ‘voice of the state’. The above model also provides multiple points of analytic entry, which can be simultaneously examined (Fairclough, 2010, p.133). Hence the juxtapositions of these processes and dimensions give us an in-depth understanding of these texts.

The parameters of understanding these texts are factors relevant to the genre of ‘political discourse’ (ibid, pp. 377-448) such as establishing the patterns of modality and transitivity through the use of active and passive voices that inform us about the responsibility and commitment of the signifier, choices of mood, thematic structure of the text and its political correctness and the signifiers focus on power and hierarchy.

4.1.1 CDA of the Parliament Debate:

The Object:
Half an hour minutes of debate of parliament in 2006 held between
Member of Parliament (henceforth referred as MP1) - Shantaram Laxman Naik (MP, GOA) – Representing the public concern over the TCN reform
And
Member of Parliament (henceforth referred as MP2) - Mani Shankar Aiyar, Union Minister of Panchayati Raj (2004-2009) – Representing the legislation

Mediated by the Chair -Prof. Kurien (Vice Chairman)

Establishing Context:
The half hour discussion in the Parliament is aimed at raising issues of significant debate concerning the public. The session holds great significance, as the relevant ministers are accountable toward exercising legislative control over executive actions to the public (Wikipedia, 2014). The answers to the raised questions are expected to be precise and accurate. Inaccurate information can be construed as an attempt to mislead the House and need to be clarified in subsequent sessions (ibid). This
discussion is under the un-starred category which means the answer to the question was not oral and spontaneous but carefully written out beforehand (ibid). The House concludes without any formal motion or voting (ibid). Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind the presence of a variety of parliament members in the audience such as the opposition party, the activists and representatives of the media amongst others.

Socio-Historic Conditions:
I would like to focus on the locational aspect of the socio-historic conditions here as we have already discussed the topical aspect elsewhere in this paper.
The question hour in the parliament debate is a formal proceeding of the House, which is marked by showing utmost respect to fellow members and to the mediator of the session (ibid). Titles such as ‘Shri’ (Mister) or ‘Shrimati’ (Madam) precedes the name of each member and only one person is allowed to speak at a time. Rules of conduct are stringent and misconduct can result into expulsion. Hence the environment is simulated to maintain a certain decorum and formality to ensure orderly behavior.

Critical Analysis:

Description of the text:
Herein I would like to crystallize the overall discussion and focus on the key arguments, which will be further analyzed under the ‘interpretations’ rubric.

The first half of the debate is led by MP1, who amidst a lot of political appurtenances lays out two main questions by giving some examples of how the TCN reform has manifested itself unfavorably for women,

A) Why are only the Panchayats subjected to such a rule and not the MPs and MLAs?
B) If the Constitution has given a priority to one-third women’s participation in Panchayats, why is a rule such as TCN brought in to reverse the effort?
Moreover, he recommends that the State should not be enforcing powers on Panchayats but should instead be delegating powers (especially financial powers) to the grassroots and should be creating conducive environment for the women to work in Panchayat offices. He does not question the population policy of the government but quotes Prof. Amaratya Sen’s recommendation of ‘persuasion’ in the matters of population control rather than forced policies.

The mediator (Lok Sabha Chair) requests the responsible minister to respond to the above mentioned queries and discourages interruptions caused by other MPs during this pause, quoting the rules of such a debate where additional queries or debate are only allowed after the half hour session.

The second half of the debate is answered by MP2, a minister responsible for Panchayat governance. The speech is prepared (most likely by his staff) and read out with careful use of quotes, statistics and references. He says, “My ministry entirely agrees” with MP1’s letter. He in effect endorses the claims made by MP1 and reasserts the issue through more statistical evidence of the “undesirable consequences” of TCN. He makes it a point to quote authorities placed higher then him such as the ‘Speaker of Lok Sabha’ and ‘The Prime Minister’ to validate his opinion. He also shows full appraisal of the issue through quoting his knowledge and interactions with researcher, feminist and social worker Nirmala Buch. However, by quoting the law he says, “there is very little that the Central Government can do” since it is the individual states which have chosen to implement the policy. Hence, he would do his bit to help by “sensitizing the state governments”. He mentions his efforts in this direction through his letters to various State Chief Ministers.

Finally he concludes through a witty remark on how ‘Political leaders in India cannot become role models for the citizens’ by giving examples of two prime ministers, one who had many children and yet the population was under control in his times and another who had only one child and yet the population of India soared during his tenure.
Interpretations and Explanation:

We have established under the rubric of context and conditions that the event and the place of this debate requires a certain respect and decorum hence almost the entire text is written in meticulous words. The speech of MP2 is carefully crafted to ensure political correctness as the signifier himself admits toward conclusion, “What we wanted to say through these rather guarded words” meaning he is consciously aware of his milieu and his audience.

MP1’s remarks are filled with active sentences as he produces a range of examples leading up to his argument, which represents truth modality and high commitment (Winther & Phillips 2002, p. 83-84).

On the other hand, MP2 replies with passive sentences on behalf of his ministry often using ‘we’. Passive voices are synonymous with politeness and places emphasis on action rather than the actor. However, passive sentences reduce the responsibility quotient of the signifier (ibid, p. 83). MP2 constantly validates all his statements by referring to the power hierarchy, “I would like to invoke an authority more important even than the Ministry in this regard, and, that is none other than the hon. Speaker of the Lok Sabha” and then again “Sir, bearing in mind the view expressed by the hon. Prime Minister …” but toward the conclusion he changes gears to balance his own position and all other power holders making them humble in the spirit of the argument (of equality) by changing the mood into lighthearted humor saying, “I think, politicians boost themselves far too much in imagining that their personal or family behavior will determine the personal and family behavior of crores and crores of Indians. Hundred crore Indians don’t esteem us so highly that they make their personal or family decisions on the basis of our behavior.” Through the repetition of the word ‘crores’ three times in a single sentence (and in one breath) he involuntarily tends to acknowledge the issue of population growth. Moreover this remark also hints that he does not think it necessary to implement TCN on MLAs and MPs as suggested by MP1. Mark the transitivity patterns in the above discussion; Halliday (1985) explains transitivity, “as a fundamental property of language that enables us to
build a mental picture of reality, to make sense of their experience of what goes on around us and inside us. Our most powerful conception of reality is that it consists of ‘goings on’ of doing, happening, feeling and being. These ‘goings on’ are sorted out in the semantic system of the language, and expressed through the grammar of the clause”. First MP2 establishes the power hierarchy to justify his own opinions thereafter he makes himself humble to adjust to the spirit of the argument and along the way he slips in the core issue of population without specifically elaborating on it to suit the argument which is skewed more toward concern for women. He chooses to ignore the questions regarding the issue of why the States are not divulging (financial) powers to the Panchayats. We pick up a thread of these interpretations in the overall CDA conclusion at the end of section 4.1.

4.1.2 CDA of the Supreme Court Judgment:

The Object:
Transcript of the Supreme Court Judgment (SCJ), in 2003 for the TCN stipulation implemented in the Haryana Panchayats since 1994 between,

The State of Haryana
And
Javed & Ors (representing the public)

Judges: C. Lahoti, Ashok Bhan & Arun Kumar.

Establishing Context:
The milieu of a courtroom is often charged with strong and powerful arguments, which can be intimidating. In a Supreme Court hearing, the environment is especially formal and rehearsed to ensure stringent use of legal protocols, language, conduct, attire and etiquette. The transcript of the above-mentioned object is a 17-page speech, which is carefully written and referenced through various legal patois. The arguments are explained through many examples as an attempt to justify the
Judgement. The language is active, compelling and definitive since there is no higher authority to appeal to after the Supreme Court hearing. The hearing of a Supreme Court Judgement is a significant event, in a case such as TCN; the audience would consist of politicians, petitioners, press, civil society representatives and public at large. Moreover, the responsibility of the Judgement and the words spoken are of great significance since they would be documented and can be quoted or referenced in other courts and in media. The decision of the court is by consensus of all three Judges, but it is not clear who is delivering the speech. Hence my analysis will be referred to as the voice of the State of Haryana. It should be noted that there are other states in India such as Madhya Pradesh, which had implemented TCN and then reversed it based on its adverse effects (THP representative).

**Socio-Historic Conditions:**
The Supreme Court of India, formed in 1950 is the highest court of appeal and is considered to be a guardian of the Constitution (Wikipedia, 2013). It consists of the Chief Justice and thirty other Judges (ibid). The jurisdiction of the Supreme Court extends toward enforcement of fundamental rights, it can hear disputes between different governments or it can become an advisory court on matters referred by the President (ibid). A majority of proceedings may be counter appeals to the orders of subordinate courts or high court, however lately the Supreme Court has extended its jurisdiction to address cases which maybe in the interest of the public at large (SCI, 2014). The Concept is referred to as ‘Public Interest Litigation’ (PIL), which, may be filed by any individual or a group (ibid). Such an extended jurisdiction is unique only to the Supreme Court of India. The Object under analysis is also a PIL.

The seal of the Supreme Court is inscribed with writing in Sanskrit, which signifies the courts commitment in terms of, righteousness, truth and equality of justice (ibid). The Supreme Court (SC) ensures any miscarriage of justice through the option of review petition, which can be filed within 30 days of a SC hearing and beyond that a curative petition can be filed on the dismissal of the review petition (ibid).
Critical Analysis:

Description:
The text is adorned with courtroom lingo and cited with a series of legal paraphernalia. Overall, the writ petitions against the state of Haryana are of two categories,

A) TCN is not specific and has many loopholes which are discriminatory
   (Refers to Article 14 of the Indian constitution) and
B) TCN is in violation of basic human rights such as the freedom of personal, religious and reproductive rights (Refers to Article 21 & 25 of the Indian constitution)

The State defends its legislation on all counts and explains its defence separately for each point by giving examples of other similar cases.
There are many details to category A, however the State’s defence is straightforward in its ruling, that the intention of the reform is “to popularize the Family Welfare/Family Planning Programme, which is consistent with the National Population Policy (NPP)”. This according to the state is in sync with the objective of self-governing powers endowed upon the Panchayats. The defense quotes from the NPP 2000 document, “Demonstration of support by elected leaders, opinion makers and religious leaders with close involvement in the reproductive and child health programme greatly influences the behaviour and response patterns of individuals and communities…”. Moreover the state argues that the norm is implemented only to the lower tier of governance perhaps as a start, and hence the decision to implement a law in a phased manner cannot be termed discriminatory or anti-constitutional. Referring to the diversities of India, which present peculiar problems, the state defends its position by suggesting that, “A uniform law, though is highly desirable, enactment thereof in one go perhaps may be counter-productive to unity and integrity of the nation”.

Toward the defense of category B petitions, the state clarifies that TCN is a statute only for Panchayat members and leaders, hence just a stipulation for citizens that want to “contest the elections” which is neither a fundamental nor a common law
right. To address the fundamental rights issue especially with regard to personal liberty the defence states that, “the lofty ideals of social and economic justice, the advancement of the nation and the philosophy of distributive justice cannot be given a go-by in the name of undue stress on fundamental rights and individual liberty. Reasonableness and rationality, legally as well as philosophically, provide colour to the meaning of fundamental rights...”. He further explains that “fundamental rights are not to be read in isolation”, they should be read along with the Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 51A and 47), which talks about empowering and uplifting the weaker sections of the society and improvement of public health besides other responsibilities of the State.

Atleast three pages in the document are especially devoted toward making a point on how the population growth is detrimental to the overall development of the country and as a global phenomenon. Statements such as ‘India has been (dis)credited of being second only to China as the most populous country in the world” indicates the frustration of a democracy which lacks the resources to keep up with the growing numbers. The NPP is quoted in various places with references to China’s policies of incentives for couples with a single child and drastic disincentives for couples breaching the one child norm. It is further clarified that, “complacence in controlling population in the name of democracy is too heavy a price to pay, allowing the nation to drift towards disaster”. By quoting many academics and NPP priorities, it is summed up that “population explosion is a national and a global issue and provides justification for priority in policy-oriented legislations whenever needed”.

Many other examples and loopholes in the TCN stipulation with regard to religious rights are explained by quoting Article 25 which clearly states that the freedom of practicing religion is subject to public order, morality and health. The moot point is that “the personal law operates under the authority of the legislation not under the religion and therefore, the personal law can always be superseded by legislation”. “If Muslim law permits marrying four women, the personal law nowhere dictates it as a duty to perform four marriages, or that marrying less than four women is offensive to the religion”. And through many other such examples it is stated, “a sharp distinction
must be drawn between religious faith and religious practices”. Indicating that the Panchayat member would be disqualified if he has more than two children with one wife or several wives, similarly in case if the couple decides to give away a child for adoption, the offspring will still be considered their child. Hypothetical examples such as, ‘birth of triplets’ or ‘twins in second pregnancy’ are dismissed by calling them exceptions, which cannot render the rule irrelevant.

Finally, it is concluded that “if anyone chooses to have more living children than two, he is free to do so under the law as it stands now but then he should pay a little price and that is of depriving himself from holding an office in Panchayat in the State of Haryana. There is nothing illegal about it and certainly nothing unconstitutional about it”.

Interpretation and Explanation:
In addition to the parameters laid out by Fairclough’s (2010) CDA model, to analyze the SCJ document in its entirety with its extensive text content of nearly 17 pages addressing a variety of arguments, I would like to incorporate Franzosi’s (1989) relational content analysis, which uses word count in relation with the actors and their actions toward analyzing precedence. After having established precedence I take up the more nuanced model of Fairclough (2010) to understand patterns of modality and transitivity through the use of active and passive voices that inform us about the responsibility and commitment of the signifier, thematic structure of the text and its political correctness and the signifiers focus on power and hierarchy.

One of the intentions of this discourse analysis is to be able to understand how the power holders have reacted to the issues of women’s empowerment in the context of the TCN reform. The petitions in the SCJ are directly or indirectly addressing both of these issues through the contestation of human and reproductive rights, however it is important to note what sets precedence in the eyes of the court to determine the signifier’s (The State of Haryana) priority. To be able to establish the precedence in the context of the TCN reform between two distinct concerns, a) the concern on how the TCN norm is playing out adversely against the empowering of women or b) the
concern on controlling the population or promoting the ‘family planning’ agenda. The word counts on the use of the word ‘women’ versus the use of the words ‘population’ or ‘family planning’ would help us analyze what sets the precedence of the signifier in the SCJ document. As indicated by Franzosi (1989) it is important to note the actor and their actions context of using these words to be able to qualitatively analyze precedence. The word ‘population’ is used 42 times in the text, referring to the NPP or related policies 10 times, as a national concern referring to it as an issue 26 times and as a statistical comparison 6 times. Additionally, the term ‘Family Planning’ is used 12 times in the context of a population related awareness campaign. Whereas the word ‘women’ is used only 13 times in the entire document of which 6 times with reference to women’s welfare, 4 times in religious context of Muslim men marrying four women and only thrice with reference to women’s place in the reform with a presumption that “women are not so helpless as to be compelled to bear a child against their own wish”. Furthermore, it should be noted that the words ‘empowerment’ or ‘equality’ are missing completely from the text.

The above relational content analysis shows that population is a much larger concern of the State of Haryana which takes precedence over other concerns of the public. It also indicates that the issue of women’s welfare maybe of some importance to the signifier however the issue of women’s empowerment is entirely neglected as it appears from the SCJ document above.

As established earlier, the language is status quo to a courtroom and the speech is delivered in an authoritative manner with stalwart and active voices assuring full responsibility and commitment of the signifier (Fairclough, 2010). The signifier is represented by the use of ‘we’ indicating the consensus of all three Judges on behalf of the State of Haryana. The thematic structure of the document is intertwined with many different arguments (as per the petitions) and the speech of the judges address these arguments by going back and forth as the topics are inter-related. The arguments are authenticated through use of examples from earlier judgements, statistical analysis, academic or press references and through quoting different laws, by-laws and policies of the country. Such validation is perhaps essential to courtroom
proceedings but it is also indicative of the strength of the argument and the finality of the signifier’s decision that is consciously aware of the power endowed in this context. The repetitive and multi dimensional explanation of the Judgement is also representative of the concept of ‘generic chaining’ as explained by Fairclough (2010, pp.180-181) when such a hearing becomes part of the generic chain of social production, for example, the courtroom speech would take on a different spin in a media report, an academic paper or in a parliament speech. The signifier hence bases his argument from all the different perspectives to solidify the Judgement.

4.1.3 Conclusion:

Based on the above CDA, the overall understanding of the signifiers stand on the issue of the TCN norm and women’s empowerment can be concluded as follows:

On one hand the Parliament debate gives us the picture of the signifier’s concern for women and yet it reflects a clear strategy to ‘pass the buck’ and remain non-committal by using passive sentences whereas the Supreme Court Judgement is definite and clear in its content with potent active sentences signifying a position of authority and indicating a distinct priority toward the population issue. The State of Haryana which shows one of the lowest girl child ratios (MOI, 2013) clearly needs the ‘sensitization’ as indicated by MP2. The SCJ document does not feature the exact content of the petitions hence it is unclear if the PIL has ignored to address the specific issue of TCN’s adverse ramifications on women, which is peculiar since 70% of disqualified candidates in India are women (Visaria et al, 2006) or is it the court that has chosen to ignore it. In either of the situations, what becomes apparent is that in the State of Haryana, the link between TCN and women’s empowerment issue is missing (Rao, 2006). Moreover, throughout the speech the candidate is referred to as a man, for example in the concluding remarks from the SCJ it also slips away that the Judgment assumes the candidate (Panch or Sarpanch) to be a male as the speech addresses the candidate as ‘he’. Should we understand this as a common drift of language or perhaps a deep-seated patriarchy in an otherwise rehearsed and stalwart speech. "If anyone chooses to have more living children than two, he is free to do so under the law as it stands
now but then he should pay a little price and that is of depriving himself from holding an office in Panchayat in the State of Haryana. There is nothing illegal about it and certainly no unconstitutionality attaches to it”. Chouliaraki (1998) suggests that a discourse is a system of options from which the language users make their ‘choices’ and according to Hall (1997) each ‘choice’ carries its share of socially ingrained values through which a representation is constructed.

On the other hand MP2’s speech which, focuses heavily on feminist issues with approximately 70% of his arguments in the favor of women, tends to totally ignore MP1s question regarding the deployment of powers to the grassroots tiers of governance, which is perhaps a key factor in the political game of hierarchy, power and money (Pandey and Dasgupta, 2006). He shows his concern on the repercussions of the TCN policy; he however remains non-committal toward solving it by quoting legislature limitations and the law. He nonetheless, displays his efforts toward influencing the state governments by ‘sensitizing’ them which we hope works in future for the State of Haryana.

We pick up these observations in the final section of this paper and discuss it further in relation to the interpretations from the qualitative interviews.

4.2 Interpreting Interview Transcripts

In this section first I summarize some of the salient features of my interviews with the representatives of the civil society and the community members separately and thereafter I discuss the interviews with the women Panch and Sarpanches to be able to scale them on the three dimensional model of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). I would also like to use a large base of available research to validate some of these findings. The salient points outlined in this section will be discussed further in the concluding section.
4.2.1 The Civil Society

My interviews with THP’s representative and the ISS Chairman were skewed toward understanding their stand on the TCN issue but also to gain knowledge about the changing scenario at the grassroots considering their extensive experience in working with the downtrodden communities in rural India. The salient factors to be observed through both these discussions were that:

i) The civil society does not consider population as an issue but rather an asset. Dr. Mathew gives example of countries like China or from the European Union who have a large population of old people and compares it to India’s young population who are driving the economic work-force in the present times. THP personnel also has a similar opinion as she describes the current increase more as a momentum, “It’s this ‘fear’ of population growth that drives the usage of this norm; a hydra headed problem”. Buch (2005), Visaria et al (2006) and Dasgupta et al (2006) have all expressed similar views.

ii) Controlling population by violating human rights is not only coercive but also unnecessary from their point of view as they see the ‘sociological system evolving’ as Dr. Mathew explains it, “attitudes are evolving with the sociological development, cultural and related issues”. What I interpret from this is that when opportunities become available such as educational and healthcare facilities, awareness and exposure to population issues through media and political participation, then social and cultural attitudes would change in a natural course without the need for reforms such as the TCN. THP representative adds the feminist dimension to the population issue as she explains, “The measures consistently violate women’s rights, especially their reproductive rights. One has to realize that in a deeply feudal and patriarchal society, women don’t really have a say with regards to number of children she wants to have. It is predominantly driven by the preference for a boy. And this is cross cutting – class and caste both.”
iii) THP’s advocacy is particularly concerned with the women leaders as explained by their representative, “for THP, since we are working with elected women representatives at Panchayats to build their leaderships…”. Dr. Mathew’s Institute also works closely with the women in Panchayats and his observations are that these women who become Panch and Sarpanches “get recognized by the community, the village, a group of villages and …in the Taluka and in the block or in the district level which she never did, so she is different – that respect is coming and I am very positive about it” he adds, “slowly but steadily”. The overall scenario as I see through their eyes looks reassuring in the favor of women’s empowerment. However, it is perhaps important to note here that he is still referring to a very small percentage of women who are gaining this respect, there are other examples of documented memoirs from some Sarpanches, who struggle with gaining the more intrinsic empowerment issues at a personal level in spite of gaining a lot of public acclaim, for example in the words of Jothimani “…many women politicians are subjected to such filthy attacks (related to personal character) and miseries. Married women do not stand for re-election precisely for these reasons, no matter how honest and blameless they are” (Jothimani, 2007, p.72).

4.2.2 Community people

The Chinese philosophy of “yin & yang” suggests that the forces that interact to form a dynamic system consist of opposing yet complementary elements, in which the whole is greater than the parts (Wang, 2014). Similarly, in a society no discussion can be complete until interactive dynamics of both sides are taken into consideration. Hence, my choice of participants in this section has been especially men, to be able to get a full picture through cross-referencing the point of views of women and men. It is vital to observe the reactions of men, their expectations of their wives or the women leaders in their community and their views of the TCN reform to be able to determine the dimensions of resources, agency and achievement but most importantly
the aspects of tradition and culture which have become naturalized, referred to as ‘doxa’ (Bourdieu, 1977).

I would like to summarize the salient points from the interviews of two different male representatives of the community in which the Sarpanch and the Panch hold office and who are also the participants from the next section of interviews. Daxesh from Matre village is a Journalist by profession; he is also the husband of Panch Jayashree. Ghanshyam from Jabugam is a businessman and a farmer who owns banana farms in the village. He is acquainted with the Deputy Sarpanch of the village personally since she belongs to his community. My questions were designed to gauge what they perceived of the Women Sarpanch and the TCN norm but also to understand how the Panchayat offices worked and what were the different challenges at the village level politics. Some of the important points that I would like to note from these discussions were:

i. Both of them indicated that the Sarpanch was appointed as a proxy under the WRB quota but it was their husbands who took care of most of the work. Daxesh was kind in his words but very explicit he says, “She is not an ideal example of women’s empowerment. She lacks the maturity or the confidence, and her husband helps her, which is good but if we are expecting that she should become independent, confident, social and influential – then that is not the case. She needs to be guided a lot and someone educated needs to be by her side all the time for her to conduct office, but she tries and her husband supports. There are other cases where the woman is just signing the cheque and is completely in shadow of all the power that is exercised by her husband, they are only for namesake.” He adds, “a majority of the WRB candidates are still in this category”. Ghanshyam expressed similar views, “you see the regular office work is fine, but as a Sarpanch to get things done, it is important to have connections and influence to be able to achieve some progress.” He explains further, “but you see, these women are not doing this full time they are just part time workers, moreover they are often nominated by their community as their representative, so they don’t really have the skill to perform these jobs, it is different for educated women, who will make a real difference if they are entrusted with such
jobs but such women are very few, maybe 5-10%”. During the discussion both the participants mentioned that the primary duties of a woman are to cook, clean and care for the children and the elders and if they don’t do it who will? Ghanshyam explains that in cities the educated workingwomen can afford to appoint a lady servant to do these chores, but such is not a practice in villages. Hence, women have to take help of their husbands to cope with the office end of chores, some of these chores were also perceived not suitable for a woman such as visit to a construction site and dealing with a male workforce. This shows that the roles of women and men are clearly defined and while men may expect a double role from the women they are not comfortable with a reversal of roles (Lister, 2003, Mouffe, 2005). Moreover, it also indicates the autonomy of men as individual actors as compared to women’s roles which are relational (as mothers and wives) as pointed out by Nelson (1996), which he explains is symbolized through her acceptance of husband’s name after marriage.

ii. Their opinion regarding the TCN stipulation was starkly different, Daxesh was in favour of the norm and had a very interesting explanation too, he says, “It is important for the Panchyat leaders and the Panch members who may or may not be very educated to also understand these aspects of overall national development and set an example of themselves by following the policy so that they can tell the rest of their community to also follow it” and when asked if the community would listen to their leaders so easily, he explained that it was not so easy but at least there will be a chance to engage in a discussion, “it would also help the families to set their priorities, both husband and wife will engage in the discussion to reach an understanding to see if the wife has the chance to stand in the election then the husband might suggest that we limit ourselves to two children or if he has the chance to be a Panch he will control his desires of a third child”. However, Ghashyam was totally opposed to the norm, “I think this rule is not fair, rules like you should have a toilet if you want to become a Panch are ridiculous, and have only two children, why are they not applicable to MLA’s? It should be uniform in the country; this is discriminating. The people in power make these rules and make it to suit their
needs. The awareness (about family planning) is there, they cannot afford more than two children because of the inflation. They (the power holders) are not really aware of the village scenario, people are a lot more aware of the world than they think…”.

It was acknowledged by both the participants that there was awareness in the public regarding ‘family planning’ through government campaigns and media. Daxesh’s indication that the women are participating in the family planning requires a further analysis in the forthcoming discussion on ‘empowerment’.

The interesting shift of paradigm here is that the reason for having only two children is explained ‘because of inflation’, earlier also they could not afford to have many children but now they are conscious of it. Because, in the old paradigm, children in rural India were perceived as a helping hand - to plough the fields, to fetch the water, to light the lamps. In other words, children doubled up to replace the lack of government infrastructure such as tractors, tap water, electricity as explained by Itel (WEF, 2009) but now when these basic amenities have been met (at least in the villages under scrutiny in this thesis), the new paradigm is to think of children as a responsibility (and an asset), who need to be taken care of in terms of education or nourishment by the parents. Another reason for having many children was also the high child mortality levels. With the improved healthcare systems, the levels have gone down; this was briefly addressed by Ghanshyam.

iii. It was revealed through a cross section of discussions that the role of a Panch or a Sarpanch in a Panchayat is often perceived as ‘social service’ but the real carrot in the deal is that the developmental contractors are happy to part with commissions (kickbacks) to the signatories which are often the Sarpanch plus two more nominated Panchayat members. However, women are not proficient in such dealings hence their husbands play a very important role in the equation. Quoting Daxesh, “the women are usually clean and it is even difficult for the male contractors to make such deals with women” and Ghanshyam explains, “Now for example the Sarpanch in our village, her husband used to be a contracted worker, but now with his wife’s status he refuses to do the labour work he used to do, he now has a rickshaw and gets other people to do his work, plus he takes care of his
wife’s work, because if she goes around doing Panchayat work then who will cook at home? In cities it is different because if the woman is working she would have a maid at home to cook and clean for the family, but in villages, women continue to do what they need to do – that is clean and cook and take care of the children and the husband is taking care of all the work that she is supposed to do in the Panchayat and enjoying from her position. She only signs the cheques”. We will discuss this further in the next section, however the point to be questioned here is if these women are just becoming tools for men toward economic empowerment or if there is any direct/indirect benefit for women in such an equation (Kabeer, 2011).

4.2.3 The Women (Sarpanch & Panch)

Village Scenario:

The Sarpanch in both the villages were elected under the WRB quota of reserved seats for the downtrodden communities. The community members had nominated most of these women. The Sarpanches in both the villages were uneducated but the Panch and the Deputy Sarpanch, which belonged to a higher community, had studied up to secondary school. Matre is a bigger village with approx 15,000 residents compared to Jabugam, which has only 5000 people. Moreover the location of Matre has been instrumental in the slow development; Jabugam on the other hand is more prosperous as it is located near the national highway and since the Panchayat receives payments from government for the sand deposits from the local river. Both the villages have basic resources such as electricity, water, adequate healthcare facilities, primary and secondary schools and personal toilets. Roads and drainage systems are better in Jabugam compared to Matre. The occupations of most of the residents depend on farming and dairy but some also have small businesses like grocery stores, auto garage, rickshaw or tempo services and such. Some of these people work in offices in the nearby Taluka or city. Most families in the village consist of mother, father, sons, their wives and their children. A typical family has 6-10 members. The
average income of most of these families is 10-12,000 INR (Approx. 120 Euros). (Source: Participants)

Jayashree, Panch

Shanta, Sarpanch, Matre village

Laxmi, Sarpanch with husband & Trusha, Panch with daughter in Jabugam village

The women interviewed under this section were a) Sarpanch Shanta, 55 years old and Panch Jayashree 45 years old from Matre village and b) Sarpanch Laxmi 30 years old and Deputy Sarpanch Trusha 33 years old from Jabugam. The interviews were one-on-one to enable each of the participants to talk freely; the focus was on the role of the lady Sarpanch in the village and the reason for choosing a subordinate from her office was to get a detail of how she conducts office and what the subordinates think of her. The discussion was based on a semi-structured questionnaire to draw a picture regarding the facilities in the village, her personal life and her life as a Sarpanch but also to gauge her own views and preferences regarding ‘family planning’ and TCN. The idea was to draw up the three-dimensional model of resources, agency and achievement (Kabeer, 1999) to understand the intrinsic values of women’s
empowerment. First I would like to summarize the salient points from these interviews and in the next section (Section 5) I will evaluate these points along with the earlier observations.

i. **Caste Dynamics**: The caste differences were very apparent through all the above interviews. Although all these castes can be categorized under the marginalised communities, even within these communities they have many demarcations and hierarchies (Eriksen, 2002) often referred in a more civilised lingo through mentioning their last names, for example Barots, Solankis, Darbars and such. Shanta explains, “I live in the area of other caste (Barotwada) and we all live happily without conflict, maybe there is some jealousy but that is everywhere”. Jayashree who is a Barot also cannot help commenting on Shanta’s community, “It was Shanta’s community that suggested and elected her – their community has a lot of unity amongst themselves, better then our community. In our community people show superficially but in such cases they don’t always support”. Furthermore, the bonds within each of these communities appeared very strong and it seemed important for the community to have their own representative in Panchayat. The communities appear to exist like oil and water, they may co-exist but never mix, for example it is culturally demeaning to have inter-caste marriages (Buch, 2006). Eriksen (2002, p. 158) talks about “the rise of Hindutva, a movement that has emerged as a reaction against the greater national equality representing the interests of ‘twice-born’ upper caste Hindus”. This indicates how culture often situates through ‘difference’ and perhaps more through contestation rather than cohesion (Schech and Haggis, 2000, p.27).

ii. **Reproductive Issues**: Almost all women except Shanta who is exempted from the TCN norm due to her age had one or two children and showed no desire to have more, however they all expressed gratitude of their husbands to not mind if they only had girls. Their views regarding the TCN stipulation were divided, Shanta thought it was important for the Sarpanch to practice what they preach and hence it was a good rule but she also mentioned that it was
not fair if the woman already had three children but was interested in contesting. Trusha was clear that such a stipulation was useless since if she herself as a woman had two daughters and she wanted a third child (boy) she would resign the Panch seat because the political position is only for 5 yrs, whereas a boy child is for a lifetime. I would like to question the element of “doxa” (Bourdieu, 1977) with reference to these observations in our further discussion. Three of the four participants had passed the reproductive age of bearing a child and the fourth participant Laxmi was not clear what she was doing to prevent pregnancy but she said she did not want any more children beyond her two daughters, in her own words, “No I am happy with two girls, the inflation is too much we cannot afford more than two children, it is up to God, whatever he wishes, we cannot decide if we don’t have a boy” and then, “my husband says that we should think of the girls as boys, so no more children”. This confirms the earlier observation of Daxesh who points out the mutual discussion of couples and participation of women in their reproductive choices (Section 4.2.2, p.37).

iii. Office and Community Dynamics: Both the lady co-workers (Panch) thought that the Sarpanch lacked the skills of leadership such as independence, influence, confidence and education. Based on the overall interpersonal dynamics it appeared as if the co-workers were supportive and happy to guide the Sarpanch to the best of their abilities however it was repetitively admitted that there was no change in the women from before attaining the position of the Sarpanch and after. In both cases the Panch were better educated then the Sarpanch. All the women participants had support from their husbands and family members for their Panchayat positions, or rather it appeared as if the community members convinced the family members to choose their candidate. For example Trusha says, “My brother-in-law rather than my husband, he was interested that I apply for the seat especially because this village belongs to our caste (Darbar) and it was important that this seat be filled with our caste member, so that we can represent our community”. We make a note of women’s lack of any explicit agency in the abovementioned scenario as explained through the
observations of Batliwala (2010) who opines for “strategies for women to locate and articulate social changes rather than handouts through such quota systems” which we discuss further in the concluding remarks of this thesis.

iv. Men and Home: All the women considered home to be their first priority and expressed a level of discomfort in interacting with men in the offices. Jayashree mentioned her discomfort with all men but especially the male Deputy Sarpanch who was also an alcoholic, “the deputy Sarpanch is from our caste but (flushes) I don’t know how to explain, you see (awkwardly) he is a man and you see he has a drinking issue. So it is difficult for women to talk to him, if I go to the meetings I try not to interact with the men I just represent myself and say aloud the issues that require solving”. Jayashree, who works as a school teacher and is also a Panch who desires to be a Sarpanch someday was clear that she was capable of the job but she would only take it up if she can cope equally with her house chores as that would hold priority, “I have been approached by many even the ruling govt BJP people – but I have to think of the family first, I have responsibility of taking care of my in laws and children”. We take this discussion forward in the next section by especially questioning the element of ‘doxa’ (Bourdieu, 1977).
5. Analysing Empowerment:

I will pick up points from our earlier observations to analyze the three interrelated elements from Kabeer’s (1999) model of empowerment, resources, agency and achievement; to answer my research question:

“Will the government’s effort to give the rural Indian women a voice in the public sphere enable them to find a voice in matters related to social and reproductive rights in the private sphere?”

A close look at the research question will indicate that we are comparing the subject of empowerment on two levels - public and private. Additionally the question is also comparing the implications of WRB and TCN on these two levels. Hence my research here pivots the subject of empowerment of women in rural India specifically to analyse the suggestive extrinsic and intrinsic values of empowerment. The extrinsic value here is indicated through their roles as women leaders and the intrinsic is especially indicated through their roles in choosing the gender and number of children they want to have. There are many other parameters to gauge empowerment such as their choice of husband, their rights to property or their role in decision making concerning children’s health, education etc. However, in the context of the reforms, I limit my research to the issue of political participation and reproductive rights.

To be able to discuss the subject of empowerment in a more wholesome way in addition to analysing the three dimensions of Kabeer’s (1999) empowerment model, I would also like to take into account the transformative model of Batliwala (1993) which defines empowerment as a process of transformation that shifts social power in three critical ways, by challenging ideologies that justify social inequality such as gender or caste, by challenging prevailing patterns of access to economic, natural and intellectual resources and by transforming the institutions and structures that reinforce existing power structures such as the family, state, market, media and education. The common points in both the above models are that firstly they describe empowerment as a process of change and secondly they both claim that all the three transformations of empowerment are interrelated and hence one in the absence of the other is irrelevant and ineffective. Furthermore, we will observe in this section that often
governmental reforms fail to follow through their efforts on all the three dimensions, which averts in achieving any real social transformation, we try to locate some of these possible sites.

5.1 Resources:

My attempt here is to analyse the availability of resources specifically to women based on my discussions with the different actors and the observations from the discourses of the State. Analysing resources in a generic way refers to women’s ‘access to resources’, however if we dig deeper we understand that women’s access to resources does not imply the choices they are able to make. Resources may indicate the potential to make the choice rather than actualized choice (Kabeer, 1999).

The WRB quota clearly has given an opportunity to the women to enter the local political arena and voice their needs and concerns and additionally to be able to change the patriarchal power structures. The participants have confirmed the availability of basic education, healthcare systems and welfare facilities. Free education and travel facilities with adequate ladies’ toilets in the schools have encouraged the girls and their families to pursue and continue education at least up to secondary school level.

To some extent a shift of paradigm was observed as indicated by Itel (WEF, 2009) in terms of how a girl child can be perceived more as an asset rather than a helping hand in rural areas with the improved government infrastructure (pp.37-38). However, a closer look will indicate that a girl child in rural India is still perceived as a responsibility who needs to be bestowed through a marriage which means spending of wealth (as opposed to earning wealth in case of a son) as observed through the talk with Shanta, “I am praying to God that one of my sons who has one son only, that he should have a daughter. We cannot donate if we don’t have a daughter – we need to donate sometimes. We all earn a lot, my husband earns, both my sons earn then we should also donate something”. She is referring to a concept of ‘Kanyadaan’ in Indian culture which means bestowing your daughter, which involves giving her away in marriage along
with some wealth that is sometimes given away willingly and at other times demanded by the groom's family as a 'dowry' which is illegal by law but practiced in many parts of India (Wikipedia, 2014).

One of the participants also mentioned the access to training facilities for the women Panch and Sarpanch regarding office procedures and systems. In the words of Daxesh, “Well power is useless if it is not handed to the right candidate, if I know how to ride a bicycle only and if I am asked to sit in a plane cockpit, I won't be able to fly it. Not only that, if I press a wrong switch it is possible to create a disaster, which is also possible in these cases. So government has grooming and training classes for Sarpanches where they can go to get some basic understanding, so it is a good structure of developing the grassroots”. Employment possibilities for women in other government organisations such as schools, as in the case of Jayashree were also observed. However, a note should be made on increased workloads for women in such cases (Lister, 2003, pp. 141,142).

On the other hand, the TCN stipulation, which disqualifies both women and men with more than two children, maybe perceived as a hurdle to the above-mentioned resources. The stipulation interferes with the cultural norms and societal expectations of a woman. As admitted by one of the participants Trusha when asked hypothetically to choose between having a third child versus becoming a Sarpanch she says, “It depends on the situation, but I think I would certainly choose the third baby because being Sarpanch is only for 4-5 years, whereas the baby (boy) is for a lifetime”. Hence, given a choice the priority of a woman to bear a boy child is much higher than holding Panchayat office, which I interpret as a priority based on the cultural ‘doxa’ in the society. This ‘doxa’ is perhaps based on Hindu religion, which recognizes the need for a son for religious efficacy and spiritual salvation (Batliwala, 2010). However, based on the discussions with Daxesh (p.37) who suggests that, “it (TCN) would help the families to set their priorities, both husband and wife will engage in the discussion to reach an understanding”. Hence there is evidence that perhaps such a stipulation if enforced in a just manner by the government may result in favour of a woman. Paul’s (2011) research suggests that the WRB quota system with the TCN stipulation has a direct impact on the male use of contraceptives, “The proportion of males using condoms is
higher by 7 points in ‘reserved’ villages compared to ‘unreserved’ ones.” This is perhaps a silver lining on the TCN cloud that maybe able to displace the cultural ‘doxa’ which we will discover further when we make a combined analysis based on agency and resources.

The cultural ‘doxa’ plays a central role toward women’s access to the abovementioned resources, as we have observed their own priorities regarding family and hesitation of interacting with men or stepping out of their comfort zone prevents them from access of some of these resources. Quoting Trusha, “It becomes awkward to deal with the male workers at construction sites, we can attend meetings but we cannot do some of the other chores”. Moreover, there was also evidence on how this assumed subordinate status of women is detrimental to other women within the family (Bourdieu, 1977). For example, during my discussion with Shanta when she was questioned why her daughters were married so soon and if she would make her daughters part of her property, her response was, “my mother-in-law was old-fashioned so they had to be married early” and “the girls have a lot of property from their husbands. It would never be a problem”.

Furthermore, a closer scrutiny through this analysis will confirm that ‘de facto does not correspond with de jure’ or as explained by Kabeer (1999) what is written in the law is not necessarily how it is practiced in reality. Hence, it remains to be seen how developmental policies have to adapt to be able to change deeply entrenched structures, for example, how can we build reforms which can counter ‘the doxa that is legitimized by custom and religion’ so that resources can become an actualized choice (ibid). The commitment of the State toward the implementation of their reforms is hence vital to our forthcoming discussion.

5.2 Agency:

To be able to analyze the element of agency it is vital to consider both positive and negative agency. For example women’s mobility and their participation in private and public domains are a positive agency but manipulation through their family and
husbands toward subjugation is a negative agency (ibid). Hence to conceptualize women’s agency in their private and public domains, we need to understand their ability to take decisions (Lukes, 1974 and McElroy, 1992).

We have observed in the above discussions that WRB quota insists on one-third participation of women, however these women take none of the decisions. Firstly, their community people nominate them. Secondly, it is the decision of their husbands or other family members if they should contest and finally, if they are elected their husbands or other male members run the office. The women are in such a scenario just an easy ticket for the men to take charge. The excuse in such a situation is that the women are less educated or inexperienced to handle the office affairs, and hence they are guided and protected by their husbands.

Moreover, the social structure or the ‘doxa’ is that women are expected to perform their primary duties first, of chores such as cooking, cleaning and caring for young and elders. Even for someone like Jayashree, who is educated and financially independent, she emphasizes on her choice of the double role, wherein she should not ignore her family duties in the process of making her choices. Kabeer (1999) points out that, “How ‘changes in women’s resources’ will translate into ‘changes in the choices they are able to make’ will depend, in part, on other aspects of the conditions in which they are making their choices.” Women are central to home in the rural India, and a transformation of such a ‘doxa’ as pointed out by the male participant Ghanshyam seems improbable under the societal conditions, “Maybe only 5-10% women are really capable of these positions and really work for it, it is generally not acceptable for the woman to ignore home for office work and it is impossible in villages, she has to double up if she is really interested in working in an office, but the husband is not going to cook and care for the babies while she works. That is calling for a lot of trouble in a marriage”.

We have observed that the male counterparts of the women leaders use the position of their wives toward financial gains for their family (Section 4.2.3). For example, it was discovered through cross interviews and then confirmed by one of the community
members Ghanshyam that Sarpanch Laxmi’s husband was a daily laborer earning a menial amount as daily wages and his position changed significantly after his wife became the Sarpanch, he now has an auto rickshaw (three wheeled taxi) and a tempo for which he hires a driver to earn him money thereby stopping all type of labor work and instead dealing with the office affairs on behalf of his wife. Such an arrangement is perhaps beneficial to the entire family if the gains are invested productively and may elevate the position of the woman in the household and the community as indicated by Dr. Mathew (p. 35) however if women continue to remain subordinate to their husbands, and shy away from exercising their agency it is also possible that such illegal sources of income attained under the name of these women leaders can become a trap for their disqualification and discredit. The heroic tales of women leaders from other parts of India may tell us a different story (Chaudhuri, 2008) however, the indicators from my research points to the loopholes of the reforms which empties the word empowerment of its cause and content (Batliwala, 2007).

On the other hand, TCN has been tainted as a disempowering stipulation for women, however our discussions have shown that the implications of the TCN reform can be both negative and positive. There has been a lot of research from different states in India that indicate the many negative implications of the reform and the civil society representatives have clearly condemned the stipulation as a human rights violation (Buch, 2005). However, as indicated by one of the participants Daxesh the reform has the potential to become a discussion point within the households, wherein women can have a voice in the matters of how many children they choose to have (p.37). Most of the participants within the reproductive age had chosen with their husbands to not have any more children irrespective of the gender of their children. Two of these participants had a son but the other two participants only had daughters. The role of media, awareness campaigns and education cannot be ignored in this discussion, however there was evidence that the TCN stipulation may become an important catalyst toward such decision-making. This observation can be further substantiated as per Paul’s (2011) research, which indicates that the onus of using contraceptives usually falls on women in rural India but in ‘reserved’ villages more men were using contraceptives compared to the ‘non-reserved’ areas.
This presents us with an interesting scenario, since on the one hand a reform like WRB quota, which was designed with an intent of women’s empowerment is undermining women’s benefits in the public or private sphere in a majority of the cases, whereas on the other hand the controversial TCN stipulation in some cases may be helping women gain some intrinsic empowering benefits in the private sphere. The research is not quantitative and hence not indicative of actual numbers, but perhaps such a research can be pursued further to gain a more wholesome view of what sort of state intervention can help transform deep rooted ‘doxa’ to achieve empowerment for women in more intrinsic terms. Nevertheless, what is most apparent through the State level discourse is the lack of State’s commitment in implementing the reforms to be able to achieve the desired result. We discuss this further in our combined analysis of resources, agency and achievement to comprehend how far the goals of empowering women have been successful in the rural Indian context.

5.3 Achievement:

Achievement according to Kabeer (1999) is the quotient of the combined result of resources resulting into agency. In the current context, the dimension of achievement should be analysed in terms of the transformative implications toward the benefit of women in relation to prevalent and deeply embedded gender inequalities (Kabeer, 1999). It is unrealistic to expect the rural Indian women to swiftly free themselves of the subordinate status that has been burdened upon them through a variety of religious, cultural, social and political reasoning. Nevertheless, what we need to gauge as an achievement is if the reforms are achieving their original intent of empowering women and if this is beneficial to women overall or if more efforts are required to realise the lofty developmental goals of gender equality.

The achievement indicators based on my discussions within this small sample can be summarised as follows:

1. Women are being nominated by their caste members and then helped by the husbands or other family male members to hold the Panchayat office. Nevertheless, this has been done with the consent of the women who were
entrusted by their community and this appeared to be flattering as Jayashree and Shanta both mentioned that they were elected unopposed. Women are hence given the opportunity but my research indicates that they are just abiding by what is expected of them.

2. The ‘doxa’ is the key element, which might be displaced over a period of time; however the current scenario shows that the husbands are assisting women leaders and hence women’s empowerment through WRB becomes just a shibboleth. The only visible change is that a rural woman who had no knowledge of a world outside of her household is now becoming aware of the community affairs, even if only in a superficial way.

3. Women also seem to be consulting their husbands or family members in most of the domestic choices that they make, such as choosing the number of children, deciding if girls should attend school or should be married, if their daughters can become part of the inheritance etc. This is indicative of a certain degree of caution exercised by women to comply with the societal standards of a good Indian wife who lives amicably with all in the family including her husband’s parents. As explained by Basu (1996) “a strategic virtue on the part of the women in situations where they may have as much to lose from the disruption of social relationships, as they have to gain.”

4. The interesting change is however noticed to a larger extent in the agency of men, who have shown signs of being less patriarchal in some ways, especially in terms of choosing the number of children. The women were thankful to their husbands that they did not mind if they had only a girl child. For example Trusha says, “my husband has never shown remorse or unhappiness that we have a girl and now that I cannot bear another child” or Laxmi saying, “I have two girls, but that is God’s will, my husband does not hold it against me”. If we should attribute such a change as a result of government’s family planning campaigns, awareness through media exposure or to the TCN stipulation could not be determined through these discussions, nevertheless a transformation is visible but it is not a result of women’s empowered attitude but a change in male attitudes. The discussion with Daxesh (p.37) indicated that such an understanding between the couples maybe a result of TCN
stipulation. The main carrot in such a transformation is often the possibility of making a ‘quick buck’ through the power of (his wife’s) holding office as indicated by both Daxesh and Ghanshyam (p.35) however the benefit is not unwelcoming. Although it may be interesting to pursue this subject further by questioning if these male attitudes may change after the wife’s office tenure of 5 years.

5.4 Triangulation of Resources, Agency and Achievement:

It has been mentioned earlier in this paper that the three dimensions of understanding empowerment are interdependent hence it is vital to cross reference each of these dimensions to avoid the possibility of assumptions or analytical bias of the researcher from a methodological point of view (Kabeer, 1999). I have interviewed a variety of social actors to make these cross references and I would hence like to further triangulate the different levels of observations on the subject of empowerment and determine its transformative potential.

The participants have confirmed the availability of basic infrastructure and facilities to encourage women and girls to be active participants in the public sphere. The participants also confirmed awareness regarding birth control and family planning and its benefits toward women and child’s nutrition, health and mortality factors. Hence the stage is set for the women to grab the available resources and exercise their choices; nonetheless there is this invisible layer of ‘doxa’ that affects the power dynamics in terms of caste, gender and culture, which is preventing these women to rise up and seize the opportunities. Bourdieu (1977) explains that, “the passage from doxa to discourse, a more critical consciousness, only becomes possible when competing ways of ‘being and doing’ become available as material and cultural possibilities, so that the ‘common sense’ propositions of culture begin to lose their naturalized character, revealing the underlying arbitrariness of the given social order”. Hence, the availability of alternatives to be able to at least imagine the possibility of having chosen differently is crucial to such a transformation (ibid). Moreover, for the achievements to embody a meaningful choice it is important to know if the choices
were materially possible and conceived to be within the realms of possibility (ibid). The changing attitudes of men in favour of women’s reproductive rights and the gallant stories of women Sarpanches who have challenged the traditions and displaced the power hierarchies through meaningful leaderships as mentioned in the beginning of this paper are glimpses toward a possibility of such transformation. However the change is slow as mentioned by Dr. George Mathew and the deep-rooted power hierarchies plenty that need to be counter challenged through laws, reforms but most importantly through discourse or critical consciousness (Bourdieu, 1977) that can create actualized and meaningful choices.

The state has travelled only one third of the distance so far in making some of the resources available toward gender equality. One-third participation should eventually become a clear 50% if the state is committed to the notion of gender equality (Buch, 2009). Furthermore, making resources available to the women is only one part of the overall journey as emphasized here (Batliwala, 1993, Kabeer, 1999). There is no ‘one-shot’ magic bullet to women’s empowerment such as the WRB quota, ideological and institutional change dimensions that incorporate family, society, market, media and education are vital to the overall transformation (Batliwala, 1993).

Women’s issues are often on the periphery of the National Agenda (WEF, 2009) as we have observed earlier through the CDA analysis of State level discourse. The debates and reforms have women on the agenda but they seem to get easily sidelined when issues such as population take a centre stage such as in the case of the SCJ in Haryana state which has overlooked the issue of women’s empowerment altogether while addressing the TCN stipulation. We have also observed that TCN could become beneficial to women’s empowerment if it was implemented in a just and evenly way. If women were intrinsic to National developmental agenda, such reforms should consider the possible loopholes with a far-sighted approach that considers all three elements, resources, agency and achievement of empowerment and makes transformation possible at all levels of societal and political power dynamics.
6. Conclusion:

Empowering women is crucial to development considering that women lift up half the sky, moreover the multiplier effects of an empowered woman as she procreates by becoming a role model to her daughter helps establishing a positive trend toward social, cultural and economic upliftment of a nation (WEF, 2009).

The research here is indicative of the complexities of the term ‘empowerment’ of women in the rural Indian context. Batliwala (2007, p.87) condemns the use of the term ‘empowerment’ and describes it as the, “most widely used and abused buzzword in the developmental lexicon in past thirty years”. The vital learning in the above research is that culture cannot be overlooked or stirred-in ostensibly in formulating developmental reforms but rather should be customized and carefully catered to suit the local conditions (Pieterse, 2010, p.72). Pieterse explains that, “the role of development is to be vigilant of the factors that can make or break a constructive formation and hence developmental projects should not simply include culture in their mandate but also interrogate its terrain of power and its ideology” (ibid).

Batliwala (2010) describes empowerment as an ongoing process, which is relative and context dependent. The concept loses its meaning if it is lifted out of its cultural specificity, its political content and generalized into a planning tool. In the book “Buzzwords and Fuzzwords” (Cornwall and Eade, 2010, pp.111-120) she illustrates with reference to the same WRB quota system how power became central to women’s empowerment projects in the sociopolitical milieu to render the term empty of its cause and content. She describes a civil society movement before the 1990’s that experimented with feminist education strategies to create new spaces for women to collectively share their experiences of discrimination and poverty (ibid). These projects did not treat women as mere beneficiaries but strived to help women to critically reflect on socially accepted structures of oppression and their own sense of subordination. The objective was to raise critical consciousness to be able to recognize their own agency and power toward transforming political, social and economic power structures (ibid). “The main inputs in these processes” she explains, “were new ideas
and information, not handouts or services; an opportunity for women to locate and articulate the changes that they wanted to make, and evolve strategies to do so” (ibid). The popularity of these projects caught the attention of the political parties which has resulted into making women’s empowerment a political mandate to gain the votes of the large base of electorate residing in rural India thereby resulting into, “distortion of good ideas and innovative practices as they are lifted out of the political and historical context in which they evolved to be rendered into formulas that are ‘mainstreamed’ (ibid). Such generalizations are clearly not suitable to a country like India with extreme cultural diversities. Furthermore, this research beseeches the government to integrate the ‘software of development’ such as deliberating on the ‘intrinsic aspects of empowerment’ within the structural and macroeconomic reforms and not add it as a superfluous extension to be able to realize the nations lofty development goals of equality (Pieterse, 2010, p.189).

Hence to sum up the overall objective of this research, we have found that women have to be integral in exercising their agency to be able to question the social structures to be able to displace the deeply embedded layers of “doxa” both in extrinsic and intrinsic terms. Education, Information and media can play an important role to enable such a transformation from “doxa” to discourse (Bourdieu, 1977). Reforms such as TCN should not be desired to bring such social transformations, however the state can learn to be sensitive to the possible cultural repercussions and use customised, prudent and democratic strategies to realize women’s empowerment goals and benefit the marginalized communities in rural India.

Dagron (2008) in his article ‘Vertical minds, horizontal cultures’ in the book ‘Communication for Development and Social Change’ says, “the horizontal and dialogic components in content flows, which are essential to the act of ‘communicating’, are simply not taken into consideration. The whole concept of participation, which etymologically is in the core of the word communication, has been for many years bluntly ignored”. The macro, meso and micro level of communication analysis and power dynamics that are attached to the issues of democracy, political participation and voices to the marginalised, in this research
confirms this observation and consequently offers many horizontal live wires of cultural, political and social queries that can be pursued to find specific developmental solutions at local levels.

References:


