

**A TALE OF THREE VILLAGES
WITH ALL-MAHILA GRAM
PANCHAYATS**

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SUBMITTED TO
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PREFACE

I am pleased to present three case studies of villages having All-Mahila Gram Panchayats to the State Election Commission, Maharashtra. In all the villages of Maharashtra, 50% of the Gram Panchayat is made up of women members. However, in very few villages, we see the presence of all-Mahila Women Panchayats.

What are the factors that have led to the creation of these systems? Does the presence of an all Mahila Gram Panchayat also necessarily imply that women are now truly running the matters of the village? Or is it that these Panchayats are necessarily backed by politically mature men, who overshadow their decisions?

We cover three completely different political stories from three different villages Bubnal, Neerawagaj and Vakrul in this booklet. The political reconstructions of the cases reveal completely different dynamics of the women Gram Panchayats.

Let me express my gratitude to Shri Jageshwar Saharia, State Election Commissioner, Maharashtra, for granting this interesting study project to the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics. Shri Pradeep Vyas, then Secretary, State Election Commission, Maharashtra, was deeply involved in the project and his guidance was valuable to our entire team. Shri K. Suryakrishnamurty, Assistant Commissioner, State Election Commission, Maharashtra, was a mentor for our team and guided and supported us at every stage of the project right from the design of the survey to writing the report.

I am thankful to the Rural Development Department, Government of Maharashtra which funded the project completely. We are specially thankful to the Yashada officials, who were not only involved in the project as funding agency officials, but guided us through the entire timeline of the project, from questionnaire design and sampling design to participation in the FGD at the Institute. I must express special gratitude towards Shri Hemant Wasekar, Yashada, who generously shared his field experience with us, enriching our insights.

I'd like to mention the efforts of our Project Coordinator Ms. Manasi Phadke, who was enthusiastic about visiting all the villages personally and interacting with the different stakeholders to derive insights into the process. She was ably assisted in her visits by Smt. Jayashree Bhagwat, who helped her in the interviews and Focus Group Discussions arranged at the different villages. I'd specially like to mention the able guidance we got from Shri Laxmikant Deshmukh, who retired as the Collector of Kolhapur district. He not only guided us, but also accompanied Manasi on one of her visits to the villages. Ms. Ashwini Velankar and Ms. Vaishnavi Dande, our Research Assistants, helped in compiling the cases.

Once again, I am glad to be presenting these case studies to the SECM. I am sure that the SECM as well as the discerning students of decentralization and gender studies will find value addition therein.

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FOREWORD

Landmark Amendments to the Constitution (73rd and 74th) were made in 1992 in order to restore the rightful place to the local bodies in political governance of the country. As per these Amendments, State Election Commissions were established in every State for ensuring free, fair and transparent elections to the local bodies.

State Election Commission, Maharashtra has been electing approximately 2.5 lakhs “people representatives” every 5 years since its inception in 1994 in nearly 28,000 local bodies (26 Municipal Corporations, 340 Municipal Councils and Nagar Panchayats, 34 ZPs, 351 Panchayat Samitis and approx.27,781 Gram Panchayats)

Elections to the local bodies are contested more keenly since they revolve around local issues and have very little elector base per seat unlike Parliament and Assembly elections. In spite of this, it is disheartening to learn that very little research has been done in order to understand the dynamics of these elections.

State Election Commission, Maharashtra, in order to understand the intricacies behind these elections, held series of discussions with Universities and major research institutions.

It is really creditable that Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune has completed the first research project under this initiative of State Election Commission titled “Electoral & Functional dynamics of Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samitis in Maharashtra” in a record period of 5

months from December 2015 to April 2016 by engaging 10 researchers and collecting data in 6 districts of the State. They have also completed 3 case studies of all-Mahila Gram Panchayats in Maharashtra.

I am happy to learn that Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune is publishing the above research in a book form, giving analysis and observations pertaining to the women Panchayats. I am sure this publication titled “A Tale of Three Villages with all-Mahila Gram Panchayats.” will be of great use to all the stake holders including Government, Researchers, Zilla Parishads / Panchayat Samitis, political parties, future candidates etc.

It would be really good if similar research projects are undertaken by Universities and other Institutes to create a mass of knowledge not only for understanding the dynamics of these elections but also ensuring their purity which is the soul of democracy and good governance.

I would like to compliment the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, Smt. Manasi Phadke, Yashada and Rural Development Department for making this project successful.

Shri J. Saharia
State Election Commission
Maharashtra

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CHAPTER I

A CASE STUDY OF THE ALL-MAHILA GRAM PANCHAYAT AT BUBNAL: FROM UNEASY POLITICS TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Bubnal. It is a sleepy little village near Narsinha Wadi, Kolhapur. A village that has pulled off one of the most remarkable feats in Indian polity. It elected into power recently, a Gram Panchayat which consists of only women, all of whom were elected unopposed. Even as the country sits up to take notice of this remarkable achievement, and even as the village gets visits and awards from high profile Government officials and ministers, it is important to look at the story discerningly in order to understand the roots of the success and also to see where the shoots may possibly go.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF BUBNAL

Bubnal is a village located in the rich, sugarcane Shirol taluka belt of Kolhapur. Poverty is not really an issue in the area. A fairly good road takes one from Narsobachi wadi to Aurwad, from where a small by-lane takes you to Bubnal. The road runs through lush green sugarcane fields on both sides. The village streets are surprisingly well-developed and you wouldn't find those open rubbish heaps and open drainages as you proceed into the village.

According to Population Census of 2011, Bubnal village has population of 3154 of which 1646 are males while 1508 are females as per Population Census 2011. There are 614 families residing in the village. The population of children with age 0-6 is 304 and makes up 9.64 % of total population

of village. Average Sex Ratio of Bubnal village is 916 which is lower than Maharashtra state average of 929. Child Sex Ratio for the Bubnal as per census is 820, lower than Maharashtra average of 894.

Bubnal village has higher literacy rate compared to Maharashtra. In 2011, literacy rate of Bubnal village was 85.51 % compared to 82.34 % of Maharashtra. The male literacy stands at 92.49 % while female literacy rate is 77.97 %. Scheduled Castes constitute 1.49% of the population; there is no record of Scheduled Tribes residing in the village. There is a sizeable number of OBC Muslims in the village; the rest of the population has Jains, Lingayats and Marathas.

Of the total population, 1105 people were engaged in work activities. Of these, 86.88% described their work as “main work” which involves work for more than 6 months. 13.12% of the people engaged in work activities were involved in “marginal” activity, providing livelihood for less than 6 months. Nearly half of the people involved in work activity were owner or co-owner cultivators, whereas 163 were agriculture labourers.

Apart from agriculture, animal husbandry is a huge occupation in the village. Many houses have cow-sheds attached to them, and cows and buffaloes are the chief domesticated animals. Women are actively involved in both agriculture as well as animal husbandry. They not only work on fields, but also supervise the harvesting and other activities. Most women take full responsibility for milking the cows and buffaloes.

Table No. 1.1: Demographics at Bubnal

Particulars	Total	Male	Female
Total No. of Houses	614	-	-
Population	3,154	1,646	1,508
Child (0-6)	304	167	137
Schedule Caste	47	23	24
Schedule Tribe	0	0	0
Literacy	85.51 %	92.49 %	77.97 %
Total Workers	1,105	970	135
Main Worker	960	0	0
Marginal Worker	145	105	40

Source: Census 2011

RECONSTRUCTING THE POLITICAL HISTORY AT BUBNAL

Bubnal earlier used to be a part of a larger village called as Alaas. The Gram Panchayat of Bubnal was set up in 1964, after it was formally separated from Alaas. The village has always seen bitter rivalry between the Jains and Lingayats; however things really started deteriorating when issues over land ownership started escalating to caste-related politics. “Farming households staying next to each other would not meet in the village but would go to District Courts and High Courts, and at times even to the Supreme Court for settling the disputes,” said a senior resident of the village. As has been observed before, money has not really been an issue in the village. From around 1990, several families had such bad blood running between them that the regular village life

was perturbed with all the court cases and constant bickering. Other people from the same caste started backing these people, and what had been simple land ownership problems suddenly became extremely ugly caste-rivalry issues.

This continued right upto 2010. The castes had formed groups within the Gram Panchayat and no decision could be effectively taken by the Panchayat. Gram Sabhas used to be regularly disrupted. No development scheme could be implemented in the village; it was as if the development status of the village in 1990 was there to stay permanently.

The neighboring villages however, developed rapidly and Bubnal became something of a benchmark to demonstrate how bad politics could really lead to bad economic outcomes.

By the time the Gram Panchayat elections were held in 2010, however, the villagers were now asking uncomfortable questions in the Gram Sabha. They had witnessed how the neighbouring villages had implemented development schemes but no such scheme had been implemented at Bubnal. The villagers wanted a Panchayat that could implement schemes and could do that fast, since they were facing a backlog of at least 20 years in development. The families that were involved in the court cases also realized that close to Rs. 20 crores had been spent on just the court expenses in the past 20 years; neither had they got a decision on the issue, nor had any betterment happened in their standards of living. There was reluctant acceptance of the fact that the money could have been better spent in developing the village.

Some of the elderly villagers got together to form a “Sukanu” committee. When the Panchayat elections were held, the seat of the Sarpanch was not under reservations. The members of the Sukanu Committee suggested that the only candidate who had won and was not involved in any of the caste quarrels be made the Sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat. Interestingly, all the members agreed and the candidate without any caste and political connections was unanimously elected as Sarpanch.

It was the beginning of a sea change. Suddenly, the Panchayat meetings were happening more smoothly. There was less of a commotion and more of agreement on issues. The Sarpanch had nothing to lose by declaring a frank opinion since he did not have any political connections and so the meetings started ending with a decision being taken for or against certain actions. Soon, developmental schemes started getting implemented in the village. The Nirmal Gram Yajana was implemented with great fanfare and most houses now either had independent toilet blocks or close-to-home facilities of common toilet blocks. Roads started improving, living standards started improving and the level of confidence in the Gram Panchayat was running high.

In 2010, since the 50% reservations for women candidates had already come in, the Bubnal Gram Panchayat had 6 female candidates and 5 male candidates. The villagers had realized that the main problem with the women candidates was that they were working outside their homes for probably the first time and hence lacked the confidence with which to take decisions. The husbands very often used to frequent the Panchayat whereas the wife would merely be

around to vote for or against the relevant issue. However, the main advantage of having women candidates on the Panchayat was also that the ladies were very removed from the politics of the village. If the interference of the husbands were to be removed in some way, then these women could be trained to take proper decisions for development of the village.

It was with this observation that the Sukanu Committee mulled over an idea, as to whether in the 2015 elections, 100% seats in the Panchayat could be occupied by women members. Further, thought the members, only those women be allowed to contest who do not have any political background at all.

The Sukanu Committee deliberated over the idea and found it to be fairly acceptable. The idea was shared with the villagers in a Gram Sabha, where it received extremely high levels of support. It was then refined again and finally, with a huge support from the villagers, the Bubnal Gram Panchayat decided to hand over the reigns of managing the village to women, in whose family not a single person had ever been part of the Panchayat from 1964, when the Panchayat had been formed. It also decided that husbands would have to commit to stay away from the Panchayat office, if the wife was elected.

Come elections in 2015 and every house in the village was being asked whether the lady of the house would like to be part of the decision making body of the village. Many women were hesitant, since it would mean attending meetings regularly and looking over documents etc., unknown and

unchartered territory for most of the women. Most of the women did not even know what it would mean to sign up for being part of the Panchayat. Nor could they get very informed answers from home because these were the people who really never had been involved in the Panchayat.

Finally, some (more than 11) women voluntarily agreed to contest the election. In a Gram Sabha, it was the villagers who decided which 11 women could probably do a better job on the Panchayat and the other ladies were told that they would get their chance in the next term. Thus, it was the villagers who not only decided that ladies would contest, but they also decided which ladies would contest the elections. Their nomination forms were duly filed; for every post, another “dummy” nomination form was filed which had nomination of another woman (sister-in-law or mother-in-law) from the same household, in case the original nomination was rejected for whatever reason. However, all the original nominations were accepted. Two men tried to also file nomination papers but the villagers were vociferous in protesting against this. To add to the protests, the Government officials in the village realized that both men were from households which did not have attached toilet blocks, a prerequisite for filing nomination forms. Thus, men were simply not allowed to even file nomination papers and the women members were elected unopposed to the Gram Panchayat.

PROFILE OF THE PANCHAYAT MEMBERS

AGE AND EDUCATION

There are 11 members in the Bubnal Gram Panchayat. Except for 1, all women are less than 50 year old. There are unfortunately no graduates on the Bubnal Gram Panchayat. Two of the members said that they studied upto graduation but did not complete graduation. 4 members are matriculate but did not complete their graduation exams and 7 members are less than matriculate. All members were emphatic in saying that education matters in public life. A couple of women went so far as to say that Gram Panchayat members should not only be well educated, they need to be well-informed about the current affairs in the country. None of the women read newspapers regularly, but said that they'd like to.

Table No. 1.2: Profile of the Bubnal Panchayat Members

Profile with the Panchayat	No. of members
Total number of members	11
Age 20-50	10
Age 50+	01
Less than Matriculate	07
Matriculate - less than Graduate	04
Graduate	00
Have work experience outside home	01
Home-makers before joining the Panchayat	10
Have no political background at home	11
Have political background at home	00
Have worked with Bachat Gats or some SHG leading to leadership aspiration	00

Reflecting the population caste dynamics, following is the composition of the Panchayat.

Table No. 1.3: Caste Composition of the Bubnal Panchayat

Type of Seats	Numbers
OBC	3
Jain	3
Lingayat	4
Maratha	1

In the 2015 election, there was an OBC reservation for the Sarpanch seat. There are currently 3 OBC members in the Panchayat, all of whom are Muslims. Every OBC member will be given a term of around 17 months as Sarpanch, as has been decided by the villagers. The current Sarpanch is Mrs. Ulfatbi Makandar.

WORK EXPERIENCE

Barring one, no other member of the Bubnal Gram Panchayat has any work experience at all. They are all homemakers, and as is typically true of the other households in the village, contribute towards farming as well as livestock management done by the house. Hence, out of 11 members, for 10 members, this was the first time that they actually had to manage an “office” apart from their homes. Some of the Panchayat members either are heads of or are members of

Bachat Gats; however, there is no instance amongst the women members of the Panchayat wherein it was the Bachat Gat experience that prompted the lady to contest the elections.

CONNECTION WITH THE ANGANWADI WORKERS

During our visit to Bubnal, we were surprised to find that there were at least 10 Anganwadi workers present for the meeting when we met the Gram Panchayat for the first time. They seemed to have a comfort zone with the Gram Panchayat members and were very vocal on giving answers on everything connected to Bubnal.

Whilst talking with the Gram Panchayat members, one issue which came up was of male domination in decision making. This is a common feature across villages and the “Sarpanchpati” phenomenon is one which is more a rule rather than an exception. When we asked the women whether their husbands or any male member interfered with their role at the Panchayat, pat came the answer “No”. As has been discussed earlier, all women are from families where not a single family member has ever been part of the Panchayat before. thus, these women are not privy to the most logical backup that the woman representative in the Indian village has- her husband. Now, without that back-up, how do they resolve issues?

The ladies were quick to point out that their Gram Sevak took great pains to explain each and every issue to them so that a logical decision could be reached. They also told us that the Sukanu Committee members guide them in their decision making role. Thirdly, they said, that they really

rely on the Anganwadi sevikas to help them with small procedures of the Panchayat.

This last fact was really interesting and hence we probed further into it. When is it that you need the help of Anganwadi workers?

“Well, the Gram Sevak and the Sukanu members are males. So sometimes it is not possible for us to ask them every single detail. At such a point in time, the Anganwadi workers are our true guides.”

There are a couple of points that have to be highlighted here. First, the Anganwadi workers have work experience, something which no woman in the Mahila Panchayat has. The responsibilities that come with a job, the multi-tasking between home and job, the reporting, the haggling for higher pay, the comparisons with other workers, the sense of fulfilment when no malnutrition is reported within the village, all of these are the things that come automatically to the Anganwadi workers. We could sense the difference in overall confidence levels between the Panchayat members who were home makers and the Anganwadi workers, who had a job outside the home.

The first point of connection between the Gram Panchayat members and the Anganwadi members is that the latter understand the diffidence the Panchayat members must be facing whilst handling a public profile. Second, Anganwadi workers have a very important and interesting connect across the entire village since they handle the children and hence, women in the village have an automatic comfort zone with

them. Third, Anganwadi workers have professional experience. A lady Panch told us an interesting story, “When the Gram Sevak told me that we had to close the minutes of the proceedings tomorrow, I could not understand the word minutes. I hesitated in asking him. I only had heard of the minutes of an hour. Further, I could not make sense of the phrase closing the minutes.”

“So, what did you do?” we asked. The whole Gram Panchayat was smiling.

“I went to the Anganwadi workers. They told me immediately that minutes is just a record of what happens in a meeting and closing it means taking signatures of all members present and taking the signature of the authority.”

This was truly interesting. We immediately asked the Anganwadi worker who had given this information to the woman Panch as to how she knew this.

The Anganwadi worker smiled. “Every month, we have to report to higher authorities as to how much food was received for the Anganwadi and how much was utilized. We record the proceedings of the meetings and then the Tehsildar signs on it. That is how I knew what minutes are.”

It is that simple. The Anganwadi workers have procedural experience and intimate connections with the village folk. This makes them extremely sturdy supports for the all Mahila Gram Panchayat.

We also realized that the Anganwadi workers are heads of Bachat Gats or SHGs within the village. Their

connections within the lower income group families help them immensely in terms of handling the Bachat Gat collections as well.

It was extremely heartening to see the support groups that women have created within themselves so that they can handle their public profiles properly.

ISSUES IN HANDLING THE GRAM PANCHAYAT

We were interested in knowing if the all Mahila Gram Panchayat faced any issues in handling the day-to-day working of the Gram Panchayat. The answers were along expected lines, and helped us to assess the training gaps that such political experiments create.

The first thing that the women in the panchayat shared was that they had not really understood what they had signed up for. One of the ladies who had studied till graduation said that she had truly tried to understand what her role would be. Before volunteering her name in the Gram Sabha, she had spoken to the Gram Sevak and had asked him what a Gram Panchayat really does. He told her to browse through the relevant Act, the sheer size of which was so daunting that she did not venture to read it at all. She said that had she received relevant material, a small booklet with the roles, powers and functions of a Gram Panchayat well explained in it, she would have taken the decision to volunteer her name with more confidence and ease. The other ladies too said that at the time when they decided to volunteer their names, they had no idea about the roles and functions that they'd be expected to play after getting elected.

Secondly, all women unanimously said that accounts and budgeting were alien to them. They were not used to a formal budgeting process and said that they'd benefit immensely from a training session on budgets. They also wished to take training on understanding the various development schemes that could benefit their village and wished specifically to understand how the funds for each scheme are disbursed.

Another woman connect needs to be mentioned here. The ZP member from Bubnal constituency is also a woman and she has been extremely enthusiastic in driving various development schemes in the village. She too joined us at the Gram Panchayat and spoke about the various initiatives she planned to bring to the village. One of the issues they face is that the roads that run through the fields get completely muddy in the rains and it becomes impossible to navigate even a bullock cart through those. She was planning to raise some funds for building at least semi-pukka roads through the fields.

She mentioned the fact that the Gram Panchayat members need to be sensitized about how the funds disbursed under the 14th Finance Commission can be used properly. Only then can the funds available under the 14th FC as well as other development funds available be dovetailed properly into development outcomes.

After getting elected in October 2015, the Bubnal Gram Panchayat has been meeting regularly. The women members have started getting a grip on the finances and functions of the Panchayat. Under some funds that they got

for construction, they have started construction of a hall for the Gram Panchayat. They also held a two-day camp in the week leading to women's day to sensitize women in the village towards female foeticide, sanitation and other issues. An interesting fact that they shared with us was that they did not have to spend any money on campaigning since they were elected unopposed. They hence contributed Rs. 15000 each and had bought a water purifier system for the Gram Panchayat office.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GRAM SEVAK

The Gram Sevak is doing his job of handling the secretarial work of the Gram Panchayat extremely efficiently. He told us about how he has to use different analogies to explain procedures and budgets to the Panchayat members. It was interesting to note that all Panchayat members were unanimous in claiming whole heartedly that he was their true mentor and it was never an issue to communicate matters with him.

The Gram Sevak and the Panchayat members have formed a whatsapp group; the Gram Sevak uses the group to send across important information from the GRs. The group is also used to communicate and confirm meeting timings.

The Gram Sevak perhaps gave us the most interesting statement of the day as we left the Gram Panchayat office. "It is said that behind every successful man is a woman," he said. "However, in Bubnal we are proud to say that behind every successful woman is a man."

A WORD OF CAUTION

Prima-facie, all of this looks and sounds wonderful. But there are a couple of things we need to bear in mind while examining the Bubnal model.

First, the fact that every woman was willing and able to contribute Rs. 15000 towards the water purifying system indicates that the selection of the women members may have been done in such a fashion that the economically well-off may get representation. Second, even if no woman has an immediate relative in the Gram Panchayat since 1964, we realized that some of them had an immediate relative such as husband or brother-in-law who was closely connected to an earlier Gram Panchayat as a contractor or a supplier. Some of them had their fathers-in-law as a part of the Sukanu Committee.

These are not necessarily discouraging traits; however, the discerning reader should also think about the undercurrents that would necessarily exist in a village, even though the village is one where people have a progressive mindset.

CONCLUSIONS

There are several wonderful facts about Bubnal. The most fascinating one is that the village learnt that bad politics does not usher in good economic development the hard way and that they identified women to be the most apolitical of all agents in the village. It was the entire village that made sure

that women get elected unopposed and that they would not have any political support from their family. This'll help to transform at least a few Panchayat members into independent decision-makers.

Bubnal is an interesting and a refreshing model because dynasty or family background has been replaced by a completely different eco-system made up of the elderly members of the Sukanu committee, the Gram Sevak and Anganwadi workers. It also goes to suggest that when society at large demands a change and comes together to create it, even the most unlikely political experiments can deliver good outcomes.

CHAPTER II

A CASE STUDY OF THE ALL-MAHILA GRAM PANCHAYAT AT NEERAWAGAJ: A DYNASTY DRIVEN PANCHAYAT

If the political experiment at Bubnal is largely a social consequence of a village tired with caste politics, the all Mahila Gram Panchayat at Neerawagaj is but a political consequence of some ambitious men wanting to prove their loyalty to their party. It creates a complete contrast to the Bubnal model; if the Gram Panchayat in Bubnal consists of women not having any political background, the Gram Panchayat in Neerawagaj consists almost exclusively of women with a sharp political background.

A village located in the vortex of political activity at Baramati, Neerawagaj is an atypical village because its Gram Panchayat consists of only women, all of whom were elected unopposed. A look at the events that led to the formation of an all Mahila Gram Panchayat is interesting.

SOCIO ECONOMIC PROFILE OF NEERAWAGAJ

Neerawagaj is a large village located in Baramati. The roads which lead to Neerawagaj are laden with surprises for the innocent traveler. Smooth, big roads are an indicator of the opulence of Baramati. An ostentatious Toyota showroom catches the unsuspecting observer.

Neerawagaj has a total of 1383 families residing in it. The village has a population of 7241 of which 3739 are males while 3502 are females as per Population Census 2011. The population of children with age 0-6 is 813, which makes up

11.23 % of total population of village. Average Sex Ratio of Neerawagaj village is 937 which is higher than Maharashtra state average of 929. The child sex ratio for the village as per census is 873, lower than Maharashtra average of 894.

Neerawagaj has a higher literacy rate compared to Maharashtra. In 2011, literacy rate of Neerawagaj village was 83.91 % compared to 82.34 % of Maharashtra. Male literacy stands at 89.56 % while female literacy rate stands at 77.94 %.

Neerawagaj village is administrated by a Sarpanch (Head of Village) who is an elected representative of the village.

Table No. 2.1: Demographics at Neerawagaj

Particulars	Total	Male	Female
Total No. of Houses	1,383	-	-
Population	7,241	3,739	3,502
Child (0-6)	813	434	379
Schedule Caste	1,486	775	711
Schedule Tribe	112	52	60
Literacy	83.91 %	89.56 %	77.94 %
Total Workers	3,680	2,096	1,584
Main Worker	3,414	0	0
Marginal Worker	266	108	158

Source: Census 2011

Schedule Caste (SC) constitutes 20.52 % while Schedule Tribe (ST) is 1.55 % of total population in Neerawagaj village. Out of the total population, 3680 people were engaged in work activities. 92.77 % of workers describe their work as Main Work (Employment or Earning more than 6 Months) while 7.23 % were involved in Marginal activity providing livelihood for less than 6 months. Of 3680 workers engaged in Main Work, 1827 were cultivators (owner or co-owner) while 1216 were Agricultural labourers.

RECONSTRUCTING THE POLITICAL HISTORY AT NEERAWAGAJ

Neerawagaj is located in Baramati taluka, the stronghold of NCP. Unsurprisingly, the political milieu of Neerawagaj is influenced by this political party.

The Grampanchayat of Neerawagaj is a brainchild of a 72-year old political veteran in the village. According to him, there were two major events that led to the idea of an all-woman Gram Panchayat.

The first is that there have been earlier instances of all Mahila Gram Panchayats in Baramati taluka, the most famous being the one at Nimbut. It is often recalled with reverence and hope and has been a role model for the entire taluka for a long time.

But perhaps the more immediate trigger for the idea of an all Mahila Gram Panchayat was the election of Ms. Supriya Sule as the MP from Baramati. This political veteran was of the opinion that since Ms Supriya Sule holds a revered place in the politics of Baramati, it was an opportune

time to introduce the model of an all Mahila Gram Panchayat in Neerawagaj.

Last year, when the influential men folk of the village met under the tamarind tree right outside the Gram Panchayat office, they got talking about the next Panchayat elections which were due. The Grampanchayat at Neerawagaj consists of 15 elected representatives. Out of 15 seats, 8 seats were reserved for women candidates anyway. This 72-year old veteran suggested to the others that if they could get an all Mahila Gram Panchayat at Neerawagaj whilst a woman MP was in power, it would be a political experiment that the world would sit up and take notice of. “Instead of the men, let the women in the families file the nomination forms. India is anyway experiencing a wave of women empowerment. NCP too has a strong woman leader at its helm. Let us give a chance to our daughters and daughters-in-law. We will help them to run the village,” he said.

Political will and winds were such that it was decided that all of the 15 seats should be held by women. Come elections and a total of 115 nomination forms were filed. It is here that one starts appreciating how village politics works. The 72-year old ex-Patil and ex-Sarpanch and NCP volunteer told us that he personally met with all the families whose members had filed nominations and requested them to withdraw their forms. “In a village, elections are a big deal. Winning elections is a way of winning respect. However, my experience is that losers are sore losers and they never let the Gram Panchayat function efficiently. Election processes happen for 5 months, but the politics continues for 5 years. Families who lose elections fester the enmity within them. It

has not been good for our village,” he told us. His thought hence was that if there are no elections and if the Gram Panchayat can be elected unopposed, no one’s egos will be hurt and the functioning of the Panchayat will be smooth.

It took him considerable time. Only a wily yet respected person could have pulled this one off, is what the other senior members of the village told us. It was he who balanced the power equations within the village, making sure that the Panchayat got composed so that the processes could move smoothly.

He also gave us a monetary angle to this entire narrative. “If we are looking at a 100 people contesting the election and you assume an expense of even Rs. 1 lakh per person, we are looking at a total expenditure of Rs. 1 crores within the village. If the amount can be saved and yet, a comfortable political equation can be reached, is it not a win-win situation for everyone involved in the village?” he asked.

It was thus that 15 women, from families as selected by this political veteran, were elected unopposed and an all Mahila Grampanchayat at Neerawagaj came to life.

PROFILE OF THE PANCHAYAT MEMBERS

AGE AND EDUCATION

There are 15 members in the Neerawagaj Gram Panchayat. One member is more than 50 years old, but all other 14 members are between 20 to 50 years. The Gram Panchayat has 4 graduate ladies on it. 9 ladies are matriculate but did not complete graduation. Only 2 members have not

completed schooling and are not even matriculate. Of the 15 members, 13 ladies hail from families with a strong political background. Their family members have been part of one of the earlier Gram Panchayat; many of the women come from families wherein some relative has served on the Panchayat, or as a member in the milk co-operatives, or some as an influential member in credit societies.

Table No. 2.2: Profile of the Neerawagaj Panchayat Members

Profile with the Panchayat	No. of members
Total number of members	15
Age 20- 50 years	14
Age 50 + years	01
Less than Matriculate	02
Matriculate - less than Graduate	09
Graduate	04
Have work experience outside home	02
Home-makers before joining the Panchayat	13
Have no political background at home	02
Have political background at home	13
Have worked with Bachat Gats or some SHG leading to leadership aspiration	00

The local caste dynamics are also reflected in the composition of the Gram Panchayats. Following is the composition of the Panchayat:

Table No. 2.3: Caste Composition of the Neerawagaj Panchayat

Type of Seat	Number
Open	8
SC	3
OBC	4

WORK EXPERIENCE

Barring two, none of them have an experience of work at all. They are all home makers.

ISSUES IN HANDLING THE GRAMPANCHAYAT AT NEERAWAGAJ

Since most of the women belong to politically influential families, they receive considerable guidance on running the Panchayat. When asked what the Panchayat really wants to achieve during their 5 year term, most women were emphatic about mentioning water issues.

Due the drought conditions in Maharashtra, water issues have been cropping up everywhere. Baramati is not as badly affected, but the village was worried last year since monsoons were really sub-normal.

The women in the Panchayat decided to take up the issue on top priority. “Agreed that we cannot get more water for the village, but we thought that we should at least make sure that no water gets wasted here,” said one of the members.

Each Panchayat member has made sure that no water is wasted in her ward and with this simple “stop wastage” formula, has managed to make Neerawagaj an entirely “tanker-free” village.

The men reacted extremely proudly when we spoke to them about this. “We always were more worried about getting roads constructed for the village and never really focussed on water issues. But these ladies have done a great job and within their first year of operation have made the village tanker-free. It is so heartening to see our daughters perform this well!”

Another interesting fact is that the members have now started understanding that funds get disbursed slowly through the year for running different Governmental schemes. One of the senior male members of the village told us, “They were actually arguing in the last meeting as to whose ward should get the funds on priority!” Each woman wants the funds for developmental work for her ward. This conflict reflects that being on the Panchayat has definitely created some political maturity, which is a very heartening sign and indicates that empowerment at some level has started to happen.

The Panchayat is currently trying to introduce liquor prohibition but is facing issues. None the less the women are keen on being trained about successful experiments elsewhere.

RELATIONSHIP WITH GRAM SEVAK

The women members seemed to be extremely comfortable with the Gram Sevak. He said that GRs regarding certain schemes run into 32 pages. The women members, he

said, are extremely particular about the meeting timings since they also have to stick to their household commitments. He hence makes sure that he informs the Panchayat about the highlights of the new GRs in every meeting.

While the members themselves seemed to have a very friendly relationship with the Gram Sevak, the elderly men folk in the village seemed upset about the Panchayat having male Secretary. Many of them opined that when an all Mahila Gram Panchayat was elected, should it not automatically be privy to the secretarial services of a Gram Sevika?

CONCLUSIONS

The Neerawagaj women Gram Panchayat seems to have come into existence because of the ideations of some politically ambitious men. However, the interesting point is that even if it owes its genesis to the ideas of some men, the Panchayat has already made its existence felt through its work on making the village “tanker free.”

Social and political changes sometimes start with benevolence, or sometimes, with misplaced ideas of glory. But for whatever reason, once it starts, it has the power to sustain if the agents of change take it up as a challenge.

Even if the women belong to political families, we could sense a thirst for contributing to the society. In our talks with them, we asked them if they had ever heard about Hivre Bazaar or Ralegan Siddhi, both of which are heralded as “Adarsh Grams” in India. They were enthused by hearing about the villages from us. Their Gram Sevak told us that he was thinking of arranging a study trip of the Panchayat to both

these villages. It is with some pride that we report that thanks to the efforts of the Gram Sevak, two days after our visit to Neerawagaj, the women members of the Neerawagaj Gram Panchayat went for a study tour to Hivre Bazaar and Ralegan Siddhi.

We conclude the case with a very interesting story that a lady member of the Panchayat told us. “There was once a crocodile infested lake. The king of the land declared that whoever crossed the lake would get all the riches of the land as well as would be married to his daughter. A simpleton crossed the lake, much to the surprise of everyone. He got rich, married the king’s daughter but like a fool, kept asking everyone who pushed him into the lake! We too have been pushed into the lake. And we got our kingdom too. But it’s time to stop asking who pushed us in, and to do what we were supposed to be doing.”

CHAPTER III
A CASE STUDY OF THE ALL MAHILA GRAM
PANCHAYAT AT WAKRUL- DISAPPOINTINGLY
REALISTIC

Long winding roads from Khopoli to Pen take you to a dusty hamlet-Wakrul, nestled in the hills of Sahyadris. Given the road touch it has, one expects it to be more exposed to the cosmopolitan way of life, and yet, Wakrul is extremely basic and rustic.

When we visited it, the Grampanchayat was under construction and hence our meeting with the Panchayat members was arranged in an Anganwadi. The April sun shone without respite and the tin roof of the Anganwadi heated up mercilessly. The Anganwadi did not have a fan; many parts of the village are yet to be electrified.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF WAKRUL

As per the Population Census of 2011, Wakrul has a population of 2119 of which 1116 are males and 1003 are females. There are 649 households in the village. The population of children in the age group 0-6 is 242 which constitute an 11.42% of its total population. Child Sex Ratio for Wakrul as per Census 2011 is 779, lower than the Maharashtra average of 894.

Wakrul has a lower literacy rate as compared to Maharashtra. In 2011, literacy rate of the village was 66.12 % compared to 82.34 % that of Maharashtra. The male literacy stands at 76.63 % while female literacy rate was a woeful 54.63 %. In Wakrul, most of the village population belongs to

Schedule Tribes (ST). Schedule Tribes (ST) constitute 45.26 % while Schedule Castes (SC) constitute 3.92 % of total population in Wakrul village.

Table No. 3.1: Demographics at Vakrul

Particulars	Total	Male	Female
Total No. of Houses	454	-	-
Population	2,119	1,116	1,003
Child (0-6)	242	136	106
Schedule Caste	83	42	41
Schedule Tribe	959	511	448
Literacy	66.12 %	76.63 %	54.63 %
Total Workers	752	566	186
Main Worker	281	-	-
Marginal Worker	471	317	154

Source: Census 2011

Of the total population of Wakrul, 752 are engaged in work activities. Of these, 37.37 % describe their work as “main work” which involves work for more than 6 months. 62.63 % of the people engaged in work activities were involved in “marginal activity”, providing livelihood for less than 6 months. Of 752 workers engaged in Main Work, 15 out of 752 workers engaged in main work were cultivators (owner or co-owner) while 92 were agricultural labourers.

RECONSTRUCTING THE POLITICAL HISTORY AT WAKRUL

The all Mahila Gram Panchayat at Wakrul, which was elected in December 2015, is something of an accident.

The Pen taluka in Raigad is dominated by the People's and Worker's Party (PWP). One of the scions of the Patil family, which is the founding family behind PWP, Shri Dhairyasheel Patil is the MP from the area. His house is in Wakrul itself. His wife Smt. Nilimatai Patil is the ZP member from the area.

The political background of this all Mahila Panchayat came alive as Neelima tai Patil started telling us about her ZP campaign of 2012. She explained that during the period she was campaigning, she enjoyed popularity in Wakrul and many households helped her with the propaganda. The people of Wakrul stood by her and aided her during her campaigns, so much so that she did not have to visit even a single house in Wakrul. She could fully focus on visits to other villages in the constituency. When the Gram Panchayat elections in Wakrul were to be held, PWP decided to put their might behind loyal families who had helped her in her propaganda. It was her idea to allow the women to participate in the political process so that there would be an all Mahila Gram Panchayat in a village that had a woman ZP member.

Another interesting anecdote came up as we chatted up with the women members of the Panchayat. One of the members (a gutsy tribal woman Panchayat member who represented a ward that was 17 kms away from the main

village and was situated up in the hills) expressed that women would complain about the lack of basic facilities such as water supply, primary schools (anganwadi), toilets and other infrastructural needs to the earlier Panchayat. Because of these frequent complaints, male members were actually fed up and were happy to give a chance to women to make the desired changes to the village. It was thus that an all-Mahila Gram Panchayat at Vakrul came into existence in December, 2015.

PROFILE OF THE PANCHAYAT MEMBERS

AGE AND EDUCATION

The Vakrul panchayat has 11 members. Only 1 member is more than 50 year old. All others are between 20 to 50 year old. It is interesting to note that all members have completed matriculation and 1 member is a graduate. There is only one member who has absolutely no political background at home; all other women hail from families that are politically influential in Vakrul. These families have been extremely loyal to the local PWP party and mostly, husbands of the Gram Panchayat members have been PWP party workers for a long time now.

Table No. 3.2: Profile of the Neerawagaj Panchayat Members

Profile with the Panchayat	No. of members
Total number of members	11
Age 20- 50 years	10
Age 50 + years	01
Less than Matriculate	00
Matriculate – less than Graduate	10
Graduate	01
Have work experience outside home	00
Home-makers before joining the Panchayat	11
Have no political background at home	01
Have political background at home	10
Have worked with Bachat Gats or some SHG leading to leadership aspiration	00

WORK EXPERIENCE

In Wakrul, the members are home-makers and lack any kind of a formal work experience.

KEY CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

Unfortunately, women members at Wakrul were not at all vocal in citing the issues they faced, or outlining the vision they had for the village development. None of them could quote even a couple of key development areas that they would like to undertake on a priority basis.

Only one issue came up strongly. The village has a huge geographical spread and some of the wadis are as far as 17 kms up in the hills, away from the main “gaothan” area. Since the area is hilly, water supply has been an issue. But since the village got funds for building toilet blocks, many of the hilly areas now have the dubious distinction of having toilet blocks without any water facilities. The women members had not heard of the Adarsh Villages at all. Most of the discussion was heavily influenced and led by the menfolk of the village.

CONCLUSIONS

As compared to Bubnal or Neerawagaj, the Vakrul Panchayat was a disappointment, but one suspects, a more accurate picture of the reality in most Indian villages. The women members were completely dominated by the men and did not seem to have given critical thought to the unique issues facing Vakrul.

However, as has been stated in one of the earlier case studies, sometimes benevolence is an important driver or socio-political change. Call it an accident, call it a whimsical vision, call it empowerment, the fact is that a woman Panchayat has been constituted in a very rural, rustic, hilly village. That by itself, is an achievement and a change for the better.

CHAPTER IV

OBSERVATIONS

The case studies of the all-Mahila Gram Panchayats presented above are completely different in their political aspects as well as in the dynamics that led to the formation of these bodies . However, there are a few interesting similarities in all of the cases.

1. In every village, the idea that the entire Gram Panchayat can be formed with women, was not an idea given by women. Women, in other words, have not been at the forefront of this change that has been witnessed in these villages. The idea has come from the more politically suave men-folk, who either genuinely wished to get apolitical agents to the fore, as in the case of Bubnal, or wished to carry out a political experiment that gave their party a face-lift, as in the case of Neerawagaj, or happened to support the local woman politician, as in the case of Vakrul. Women were identified as the agents of change, in each of the above cases, by the men-folk in the village. Thus women Panchayats seem to have been created only in the presence of benign male dictators.
2. In all the villages, the all-woman Gram Panchayat was elected unopposed. In Bubnal, the villagers decided to allow only 11 women to file nominations. In Neerawagaj, the political veteran of the village went door to door so as to coax people into withdrawing nomination forms, so that only 15

female nomination forms would go through. In Vakrul, forms were filed by only those families that were in the favour of the local political party. Thus, even if the Gram Panchayat has been formed, the women do not have the political experience of contesting bitterly fought elections. They do not carry with them the political maturity that comes from arranging funds and volunteers for the campaign, giving talks and speeches in meetings etc. True women empowerment will be a reality when apart from the 50% of the seats reserved for women, the other 50% will also be won by women by contesting against men as well as women.

3. Most of the women in the Gram Panchayats in all 3 villages did not have any work experience. See Appendix A for a comparison of the profiles of the Gram Panchayats of the three villages. Thus, they have shifted profiles from being home-makers to being public figures. This change is difficult for most to handle and training requirements of the Panchayat members of all three villages hence, were more or less similar. See Appendix B for a note on training requirements.
4. Apart from a few members who were involved in Bachat Gats as Heads or members, there was a notable lack of women with grassroot experience. In all the three villages, there were no women on the Panchayat who had been involved in the Bachat Gats

for a long time and then decided to extend her trust with leadership by joining active politics.

All of the observations lead us to believe that while a change is definitely in the offing, it is too early to conclude that all Mahila Gram Panchayats are symbols of women empowerment.

However, it is equally true that these all Mahila Gram Panchayats have given the women in power a new identity. They have started understanding the issues, they are pro-actively undertaking training and/ or study tours in order to better their performance, some of them would like to continue on the Panchayat for a second term. The all-Mahila Gram Panchayat phenomenon in Maharashtra is more an exception than a rule, more an idea of a male mind than the manifestation of female empowerment, more a political experiment than a socially driven phenomenon. And yet, it carries an undeniable seed of change and a potential to truly create women leaders in rural Maharashtra.

Appendix A
Comparison of statistics for Bubnal, Neerawagaj and Vakrul

Comparison of Census statistics across 3 villages

Heads	Bubnal	Niravagaj	Vakrul
Population of males %	52	51	52
Population of females%	47	48	47
Literacy rate of males%	92.49	89.56	76.63
Literacy rate of females%	72.97	77.94	54.63
Male marginal workers %	72.4	40.6	67.3
Female marginal workers%	27.5	59.33	32.6
SC%	1.49	20.52	3.92
ST%	0	1.55	45.26

Comparison of profile of women members across 3 villages

Profile of the Panchayat	Bubnal	Neerawagaj	Vakrul
Total number of members	11	15	11
Age 20-50	10	14	10
Age 50+	01	01	01
Less than Matriculate	07	02	00
Matriculate - less than Graduate	04	09	10
Graduate	00	04	01
Have work experience outside home	01	02	00
Home-makers before joining the Panchayat	10	13	11
Have no political background at home	11	02	01
Have political background at home	00	13	10
Have worked with Bachat Gats or some SHG leading to leadership aspiration	00	00	00

Appendix B

A Note on Training Requirements

Even though the political situations in each of three villages were completely different, the women members of the all-women Gram Panchayats had similar training requirements. Following are the requirements that emerged across all villages:

- ✓ What is the role of a Gram Panchayat member?
Understanding powers and functions of Gram Panchayats
- ✓ Understanding budget procedures and accounts
- ✓ Information pertaining to the different development schemes that can be availed for villages
- ✓ How funds for schemes are disbursed
- ✓ Information on current affairs pertaining to politics and economics in India
- ✓ What is an “ideal village”? Steps to make their village into an ideal village
- ✓ Arranging study tours to ideal villages
- ✓ Arranging cross-visits to other villages having All-Mahila Gram Panchayats
- ✓ Arranging talks by women who have been successful in politics at national or regional level