

## Chapter 6

### Summing Up

#### 6.1 Democracy, Women's Participation and the Public Sphere

In a rather dramatic moment in Satyajit Ray's iconic film *Ghare Baire*, the protagonist, Bimala steps out for the first time from the inner quarters reserved for ladies of the house. In that simple act of walking, boundaries were crossed, new identities forged and new possibilities created along with a new public persona. Like Bimala, for most women, crossing the threshold of the home to participate in the public sphere continues to be a significant step, albeit far less dramatic.

The extent to which the public sphere in a society offers itself to participation by the most marginalized is invariably considered to be a proof of the deepening of the democratic ethos. This apart, the act of participation in the public sphere is also valued for its ability to fulfil human potential and capabilities.

The sphere of the public is not limited to the grand world of national or international politics, but extends to the far more ordinary work place or even the humble credit or housing cooperative. Each of these sites, however small, presents a significant challenge to participation by those whose presence there is not the norm – in other words, to the underprivileged, the women and other marginal groups. However, for the democratic project to be considered successful, their participation is absolutely essential.

With the evolution of the concept of democracy and a broadening of its meaning to include the social, economic and even the private spheres, the emphasis on the representative process as the sine qua non of democracy is now a thing of the past. There is an acute awareness of existing power structures within society that limit the effectiveness of simplistic representational models, as also the artificial dichotomy of a

public sphere based on political equality and a private sphere of inequality and domination within the family. Accordingly, representation, along with participation guided by values of freedom, rights and equality across diverse sites – both public and private can be considered to be a more faithful articulation of what democracy has come to mean today.

Within this overall discourse, participation by women assumes significance on many different counts – from being an inspirational model for others to the enrichment of the participative process on account of the ‘distinctive’ qualities of women - in terms of attitudes, approaches, styles and possibly even a different ethical framework as also an opportunity for their identity based interests to be articulated and furthered.

However desirable participation by women may be, it cannot be ensured simply by mandating it. There are many factors that affect actual participation by women, including the sexual ordering of domestic labour and the demands it makes on women’s time, as also the responsibility of child and elder care that constrain women far more than men. The lack of confidence emanating from a life confined to domesticity is also a factor that can potentially limit women’s participation. A process of socialisation which encourages women to adjust and acquiesce often means that women are unable to assert themselves even as they participate in the public sphere.

## **6.2 Participation of Women in PACGHS – Influencing Factors and Trends**

Against this background, the examination of participation by women in various sites in the public sphere assumes a degree of importance. Neighbourhood associations or more specifically Cooperative Group Housing Societies offer an interesting area of study. This is not only on account of the valuable role that such associations play in providing the ‘last mile connectivity’ in urban governance, but also because such associations, by virtue of their scale of operations and the nature of concerns are far less remote and

therefore appear much less daunting than many other sites within the public sphere. These should, therefore be able to provide greater access to women.

Is this indeed the case? These ideas have been examined in the context of the Press Association Cooperative Group Housing Society, one of the landmark CGHSs in Delhi. Though small in scale, being a CGHS, it is bound by well-structured rules regarding its internal governance and structures of participation. A scrutiny of records pertaining to elections in PACGHS and the working of successive Managing Committees since its inception provided the point of entry for the study. It was used to assess the extent of women's participation, the process of their election, the nature of posts occupied by them and the quality of participation.

The extent of democratization of the activities of PACGHS has witnessed both quantitative and qualitative improvements. Thus, the levels of participation of women over the past four decades present a picture of change and gradual transformation. From the complete absence of women in the decision making process during the first decade of its existence, there has been an upward trajectory with participation of 1-2 women in most Committees from 1987 till about 2006 and approximately 4 women (20% of all seats) in every Committee thereafter.

Undoubtedly, the single most interesting observation is regarding the crucial role that legislative reforms have played in effecting such transformation, particularly with reference to dilution of gender based differences in ownership of assets, providing, in turn, possibilities for enhanced participation by women on account of such ownership. Similarly, the belief that reservation of seats offers a time tested method for increasing levels of participation has also been largely borne out by the present study.

The story of women's participation in the Case Study undertaken has also been about many firsts. Thus, after being completely absent, women not only joined the Managing

Committee as decision makers, they soon also joined the elite ‘Office Bearer’s’ club and even occupied the posts of Treasurer and Secretary. The posts of President and Vice President continue to elude women till now.

In terms of the nature of responsibilities assigned to women, it was observed that most women have been appointed as members and not as conveners of various Sub-Committees. They have also tended to be associated with certain areas such as Gardening and Cultural affairs, with unfailing regularity, prompting the doubt whether this can be attributed to some kind of gender stereotyping.

The performance of women in the course of decision making has been quite exemplary with women having taken the lead in addressing some of the vexatious issues that have been confronting the PACGHS in recent years on account of ageing infrastructure, changing lifestyles and socio economic profile of the members/residents etc. In fact, it is a happy co-incidence that as new and unforeseen problems have mounted in recent years, the presence of women in ever increasing numbers in the Managing Committee has strengthened the resolve and ability of the Society to innovatively address them.

The work style of women can be broadly described as being very hands on and proactive with a focus on problem solving. Setting up of systems, adherence to rules and micromanagement that involves attention to detail are some of the other traits noticed.

### **6.3 Narratives and Lessons on Participation**

The individual narratives of four women members of the Managing Committee have enabled a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of women’s participation. It sensitises us to the differing nature of participation by women and how constrained it is by their commitments within the family. All the narratives validate the premise that for most women, participation in a site in the public realm, such as the Housing

Cooperative is not an act of free choice to be exercised at their will. Rather, they have to necessarily wait to make such a decision till they are done with fulfilling their domestic commitments. It is educative to note that unlike men, all the women whose narratives have been recorded, stayed away during their most productive and competent years, owing to responsibilities at home. Thus, it does not take much to surmise that a fair redistribution or reorganization of domestic labour is a pre-requisite for women's participation in the public realm.

Yet another facet that emerged from the reading of the narratives is that prior access to and participation in the public sphere enhances individual confidence and competence among women. Women who have never had such exposure suffer from serious handicaps as they seek to participate.

Likewise, misogynistic assumptions about a woman's role, manner and attributes do effect the way in which she is perceived by others. Even today, a confident, outspoken woman with independent views who is ready to stand by her convictions is likely to encounter hostility that will be articulated in terms of her personal life and morality.

Despite the modest scale of activities, the not so intimidating nature of work involved and the intimacy on account of its proximity, it would seem that the issues effecting participation by women in this particular site in the public sphere have not been very different from the ones observed elsewhere and certainly no less complex.

The narratives stand out for the satisfaction and sense of fulfilment that all four women experienced on account of their participation in the affairs of the Society. It is almost as though through their experience of participation in the decision making process in the PACGHS, these women have lived the ancient Greek dictum that a life spent in the public is truly the 'good life'!