Gender Equality and empowerment of women is recognized globally as a key element to achieve progress in all areas. In order to promote development of women the UN adopted “Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women” on 18th December 1979, which came into force on 3rd September 1981.

In spite of many conventions and time bound measurable goals world statistics speak of deplorable state of women and they are marginalized from enjoying the fruits and benefits of equality and independence status. Women in both socio-economic and political levels has been inferior to men in the context of Indian Society. The Constitution of India talks about equality of men and women. But family status in Indian context is judged on account of male seniority and not of the female. Women are yet to be accorded equal status by the Society through Panchayati Raj. However realizing the needs of women empowerment, since Independence special emphasis was laid on the practical needs of women. Its purpose was to bring women into development as passive beneficiaries of development.

It was sad but not shocking to find that even the functions and duties of Gram Sabha are not known to a large majority of respondents. About 80 percent of women are not aware of rural development schemes like NREGS, GRY and funds received under these schemes. Dependence on their husbands, low-level of education, lack of interest, inadequacy of training etc. appear to be the causes of women’s low-level of awareness.

Women reservation has led only to formal and not real empowerment of women in the Panchayats. It is seen that the participation of the women shall have to get co-operation from their family members. Participation of women in preparing budget and plan is also not to the desired extent and it is dissatisfactory. It is only due to less weightage given to the women due to patriarchal and male dominated social system and age old social taboos against women in the rural area.

Suggestions :-

Here are some suggestions for the better involvement of women in Panchayati Raj for the betterment as well as the progress of the State.

(a) An important requirement for bringing about empowerment of rural women is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and bearing children needs to be replaced by a feeling of equal partnership of women and men. To inculcate this, they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both.

(b) Studies on women in politics have emphasized the contact with outside in the political process. There could be two ways of doing it. Firstly, interaction between enlightened rural women and illiterate elected women leaders be
encouraged. Secondly these women could be taken out to the urban areas and their interaction with educated urban elected women representatives be arranged.

(c) There should be increased emphasis on ensuring the participation of women in the meetings of Panchayats at all the levels. This is needed to promote and enhance their leadership qualities and self-confidence. It will help them to perform better in the Panchayats to ensure their participation in the meetings. Attendance of all women must be made compulsory from Gram Panchayat to Zilla Parishad.

(d) The women should also be encouraged to organize themselves. It can be effectively used as instruments to mobilize women of the village. Some successful women’s organizations can also act as catalytic agents for encouraging women’s participation in social and political activities. The Government should provide financial support and infrastructure to some of the successful women organizations to take up the responsibility of encouraging the women elected representatives. This task could also be taken up by the leaders of women’s movement in the State. They can also provide support to sensitize the rural women.

(e) Incentives play a vital role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision making. It has been noticed that there are very active and enlightened women leaders at all the levels of Panchayat, who have been successfully implementing the developmental scheme and have ensured over all development of their constituencies. Such leaders need to be encouraged by publicizing their leadership qualities and honoring them in public meetings. It will certainly encourage other women representatives and their success stories and good practices will get publicised.

(f) The genuine NGOs be identified for entrusting them the tasks of training, encouraging, organizing, emblazing and guiding the elected women representatives.

(g) National Literacy Mission and other organizations engaged in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan should also be assigned the responsibility of educating the rural men and women regarding the significance of Panchayati Raj and empowerment of women.

(h) The media, both print as well as electronic can play vital role in restructuring the rural society. It can act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice.

(i) The curriculum for the students at the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels should be so modified as to promote gender sensitivity among the students. There should be chapters on Panchayati Raj and Women Empowerment in all the classes at the school level and compulsory questions be set on these in the examination.

(j) The unfinished agenda of Women Empowerment be finished by enacting an Amendment for providing reservation for women in the National Parliament and State Legislatures. The reservations at local level are not enough for the Women Empowerment.

Thus women’s engagements and participation began virtually from a scratch in Panchayati Raj institutions. The journey of women leadership in local governance is not long. She is still in her learning phase to take up roles that were never of her concern in the past.

It is true that only women can effectively voice their pent up feelings, requirement and perspective in development processes. Thus preparation of women is important to voice needs and ideas of this fraction of society in development.