In the small rural village of Madur, in Odisha, eastern India, Mahak Murmu sat in her office patiently listening to Ritu’s problems. Mahak, who was elected for a third term as Sarpanch to Maddur panchayat, was very accustomed to hearing the challenges women in the village were facing. Ritu, whose husband had left her for another woman, was trying to find employment so she could feed her three children. Ritu had heard about the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) where the government provides 100 days employment per year per rural household paid at the minimum wage. Mahak explained that to enroll for the scheme, Ritu would need to open a bank account. To do this, she would need to bring two photographs and ₹250 to the panchayat office, and Mahak would help her open the account. Ritu explained that she did not have ₹250 to spare but Mahak responded that she would need to find ₹250, as NREGS payments are now done by cheque instead of cash to counteract corruption. Ritu left the office, unable to join the government welfare scheme which would help her look after her children.

In a neighbouring village, Saloni Hembrom was reflecting on her failed 2012 panchayat election campaign, and as we chatted her husband Biswa joined us. Biswa and Saloni moved to her father’s house in her native village in 2000 as her father needed someone to look after him. However, Saloni campaigned in the 2012 panchayat elections in her in-laws area – about 30 kilometres from where she lives with her family. When I asked her why she decided to stand in her in-laws village, Biswa answered on her behalf, saying ‘Everyone will prefer the in-laws area; this is always the first preference.’ Saloni sat silently as he said this, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

During our conversation, it became evident that the particular interest in the 2012 panchayat elections originally came from Saloni. She has
been interested in politics all of her adult life and who became the first woman and youngest person to be elected Block Chairperson at the age of 23, in 1997, serving a five-year term. Saloni decided that now that her son was attending school she had time to be involved in politics again. However, it seemed that Biswa made the decision that she should stand in her in-laws area. It transpired from Saloni’s and Biswa’s explanations that the fact that they were not actually living in Biswa’s native village was one of the reasons she lost the election. Voters questioned her on how she would be able to represent them if she was not living in the village, despite her assurances that she would move to the village if she were elected. Rumours started spreading that she was standing for election in both her in-laws village and her native village. Saloni lost the election by 40 votes.

As Santali women in rural India, Mahak, Ritu and Saloni face numerous challenges on a daily basis. Despite a 50% quota system for women in local level politics, progressive laws relating to women’s rights and numerous social protection schemes which aim to support marginalized communities, these women constantly navigate entangled power relations based on their gender, ethnicity and class within a patriarchal society. This chapter uses evidence from ethnographic research carried out in 2010 and 2013 in the state of Odisha, in eastern India. It focuses on the experiences of Adivasi women to understand the obstacles that elected women continue to face, and the formal and informal strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles and fulfil their roles and responsibilities as elected representatives.

The complex web of power in a small community of just over 900 inhabitants is a result of historical as well as macro-level and external influences, reflecting similar issues which are happening right across India. Power relations between political parties, elected officials, tribal and caste communities, rich and poor ultimately prevent women outside of the political realm from benefitting from an increased women’s presence in local level politics. However, as increasing numbers of elected women deepen their participation in formal decision-making structures, they have started to challenge ideologies, shift patterns of access and control over resources and transform institutions.

Women in politics: navigating power

India has had a 33% gender quota for women in local level politics since the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution was passed in 1993. This quota was increased to 50% in 2010 and was implemented