



Study of Political Empowerment of Women and Panchayat Raj in India

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Abstract

In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. In fact the status, employment and work performed by women in society is the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social, economic or political progress of a country will be stagnated. The fact is that most of the women's domestic role is combined with economic activities and utilization of their skill and labour to earn extra income for the family, which makes the family to lead a decent life. Women are regarded as the “better half” of the society and at par with the men. Efforts are being made to realize that women are real “better half” in men's life. They share abundant responsibility and perform a wide spectrum of duties in running the family, handling the house hold activities like rearing, feeding, attending to farm labour, tending domestic animals and the like, and the most important role now women need to perform more responsibly is her active participation in politics. Political empowerment of women should be one of her prime priorities and the governments and the society must contribute steps in that way to make women participate in the political arena. For that, participation in local self- governments provides initial steps as they are closer to the rural folk. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. Panchayati Raj Institutions that work as grass-root units of decentralized democratic self-government have been considered as an instrument of socio-economic transformation in rural India. At the local level the 73rd Constitutional Amendment act of 1992 has made two important provisions for the involvement of women in decision making and preparation of plan for development. This Amendment has made a provision that at least one-third of women would be members and chair persons of Panchayats. Involvement of people at the grass-roots level is the most important means of bringing about socio-economic development. Decentralization of power to the Panchayati is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision-making process. Local governments being closer to the people can be more responsive to local needs and can make better use of resources. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, to achieve this objective, a system of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayati Raj has been introduced in India.

Keywords: Human Development, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Empowerment

Introduction

The decentralization or deconcentration of power in a way that the affairs of the local people are managed by means of their positive participation. It implies the extension of democracy at the grass-root level in view of the fact that the people's participation signifies the constitution of a democratic government not merely at the top but also at the foundation level of the political system. Thus, democratic decentralization or Panchayati Raj aims at making democracy real by bringing the million into the functioning of their representative government at the lowest level. The philosophy of Panchayati Raj is deeply steeped in the tradition and culture of rural India and



is by no means a new concept. 'The rationale behind the concept is to involve the public in local planning, identification of beneficiaries, decision making and proper implementation of policies and programmes of the people as described by them. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have today the basic commitment towards rural development.' Panchayati Raj, as a system of governance, has had its ebbs and flows in the Indian polity ever since Indian attained independence. Various committees headed by Balwant Rai Mehta, Ashok Mehta, V.P. Naik, P.B. Patil, G.V.R. Rao, L.N. Singhvi overhauled these institutions which gave necessary impetus to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The Panchayati Raj, an enigmatic and elusive concept, has undergone topsy-turvy changes in its role, shape and function after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 which came into effect from April 24, 1993. With the passage of the 73rd Amendment, India is at a crucial juncture in the evolution of PRIs—the Indian brand of rural local self-government. It has envisioned people's participation in the process of planning, decision-making, implementation and delivery system.

All over the world year 2001 was celebrated as the year "of empowerment of women" with gusto, making realize our existence in a different century. Empowerment refers to increasing the economic political social educational gender or spiritual strength of individuals and communities. The empowerment includes over all development in terms of education, employment access to the resources, legislative a decision making powers, health and awareness. Political empowerment of women appears to be a much published cliched concept of the 21st century. Mahatma Gandhi had said "Women are the companion of man gifted with equal mental of capacities. She as the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man, and she as the same rights to freedom and liberty as he has". Gender equality and gender equity are emerging as major challenges in the global development debate. Social scientists and development activists are giving increasing emphasis to these fields in their agenda for research and development. As Noble Prize- winning economist Amartya Sen has pointed out, "Democracy is not only the goal of development, it is the primary means of development." Women's participation in political processes is important for strengthening democracy and for their struggle against marginalization, trivialization and oppression. Emergence of women as a strong group would change the prevailing political practices, the nature and content of debates in the legislature and women's issues can be taken care of from the feminist perspective both in policy formulation and implementation.

Although the new Constitution through various Articles (Art. 14, 15, 23, 29, 30, 42, 45 etc.) did guarantee equal rights for women, Indian women continue to remain oppressed and struggle over everything from survival to resources. While women have made considerable progress in some areas such as education and employment, they continue to be subjected to the influence of the existing patriarchal attitudes in Indian society. The dilemma for Indian women today is that despite the liberal provisions of the Constitution and various laws, serious inequalities remain. In fact, right from the days of the freedom struggle the Indian women have been consistently encouraged to take part in active politics. But due to the vitiated political milieu, resulting from increasing politicization and criminalization of politics, the level of political participation of women has been adversely affected despite the fact that there has been a marked increase in the level of literacy and political awareness among women.

Brief History of Women Empowerment

India is perhaps the first country to recognize this social fact underlined by Lenin on the International Working Women's Day and to have taken concrete measures to draw women into leadership positions and thereby into politics by giving them one-third reservation in what may



now be called the third tier of governance—the Panchayati Raj. The constitutional amendment providing one-third representation to women in elected bodies as well as reserving one-third of the offices of chairpersons for them will have far-reaching consequences in Indian political and social life. Now, some general observations can be made regarding the role of women in grass root level governance. It has come to the notice that the percentage of women at various levels of political activities has increased formally. The general trend is that those in politics are women belonging to the younger age-group. It is also revealed that women take up political career as an extension of their domestic role. While women have been active in mass movements, their presence is not felt in decision-making. The influence of the husbands and close relatives is quite palpable.

This tendency is due to lack of confidence. This dependency is a stumping block in their empowerment. Another positive impact of the grass root level experiment is the increase in the female literacy rate. Studies reveal that after two years of their election to PRIs, many women demanded literacy skills and also felt the need to educate their daughters. Issues in which women representatives generally take interest are drinking water supply, primary health, child care, public distribution system and environmental protection. One quality observed among women representatives is their patience to hear the problems of the public. They also work in adverse circumstances. It has been observed that women representatives are honest and accurate in presenting issues to the decision-making bodies and authorities. Women would bring new ideas in local governance. They believe in a sustainable development and their emphasis is on natural resources management. Women representatives working at the grass root level also believe that communal harmony is an important element of development and they strive to achieve this objective.

Empowerment of women has become a subject of great concern to the development planners and policy makers all over the world. The declaration of the international women's year (1975) and the decade of women (1976-1985) by the United Nations led to the globalization of women's issues. Many nations including India became the signatories to the policies adopted at the international convention on elimination of all kinds of discrimination against women (CEDAW). As a consequence, 'national policy for empowerment of women' was declared by the government of India in 2001. Panchayats have been the back bone of the Indian villages since the beginning of the history and are a part of her tradition. April 23, 1993 was a landmark day in the history of panchayati raj in India as on this day the institution of panchayati raj was accorded constitutional status through the seventy-third constitutional amendment act, 1992, thereby seeking to transform Mahatma Gandhi's dream of Grama swaraj into reality. This Act mandates provisions for:

- Establishment of a three tier structure (village panchayats, panchayat samiti and zila parishad).
- Establishment of gram sabha at the village level.
- Regular elections to panchayat every five years.
- Proportionate seat reservation for SCs/STs.
- Reservation of not less than 1/3 seats for women
- Constitution of state finance commissions to recommend measures to improve the finance of panchayats.

Women and Panchayati Raj:

Political Empowerment of women starts with the active participation of women in political



institutions. The grass-root level democracy entails due importance to initial participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Even though in today's political system where some reservations have been provided to women in local bodies, that has been misused by some i.e. women have been used as rubber-stamps. Actual decision are being taken by their male family members. Women may have stormed the male bastion under the Panchayati Raj system, but in many cases it is the husbands or male members of their families calling their shots. Elected women representatives have reportedly been reduced to proxies of their male relatives. Such system of de facto rule by male counterparts have to be checked and due importance has to be given to women in PRIs. Political system and decision making process is seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution. The objective of bringing improvement in the socio-economic condition of women could be successful only by taking suitable initiatives and measures for empowering them. Empowerment of women will not be possible unless they are provided proper representation in the political system. This objective should be achieved at desired level through making the provision of linking and associating maximum number of women in political affairs even at the lowest level of political activity.

Objectives

Against this back ground the following objectives are set for the purpose of the study:

- To study the Political and legal status of women
- To measure the political empowerment of women at work place.
- To assess the degree of empowerment achieved by women through panchayat system
- To identify the major problem experienced by elected women panchayat leaders.

Research Methodology

The research is based on secondary and primary data. It's an exploratory and descriptive in nature. The secondary data is collected from review of past researches and other reports. The factors have been identified then classified into three categories factors responsible for hindrance, reasons for starting the business and reasons for success in women empowerment.

The literature on female empowerment largely follows to approaches. The first set of studies considers the determinants of women empowerment. The second set of studies examines different proxies for female empowerment. Female empowerment is measured by a women's ability to make house hold decisions, relative to her husband ability to make house hold decisions. Empowerment itself has been measured by a women's relative physical mobility, economic security, decision making ability, freedom from domestic violence and political awareness and participation.

Table-1
Representation of Women in Panchayat Raj Institution's

States	Gram panchayat women	%	Taluk Panchayat women	%	Zila Panchayat women	%	total	All three tiers of panchayat women	%
U.P.	120591	15	13865	23	634	24	862458	135090	16
Gujarat	21351	17	1275	33	254	33	128045	22880	18
Assam	5469	18	669	26	—	-	33769	6138	18
Tamilnadu	31548	25	2295	35	225	35	132999	34069	26
Rajasthan	33566	30	1740	32	331	32	119419	35637	30



Haryana	16704	31	858	35	82	36	57002	17644	31
M.P.	156181	33	369	35	338	33	484484	159688	33
HP.	6015	33	558	34	84	33	20177	6657	33
Maharashtra	101182	33	1174	33	587	33	308831	102943	33
Orissa	27036	33	1754	33	284	33	87191	29074	33
Tripura	1809	33	67	34	24	34	5687	1900	33
A.P	78034	34	5420	37	363	33	246266	83783	34
Goa	468	37	-	-	-	-	-	468	36
Manipur	555	36	-	-	22	36	1017	557	36
Punjab	26939	36	-	-	-	-	75473	26939	36
W.B.	17883	36	2997	35	243	34	58461	21123	36
Sikkim	326	37	-	-	38	30	965	354	37
Kerala	3883	38	563	36	104	35	12117	4550	38
Karnataka	35305	44	1343	40	335	36	84886	36983	44
Bihar	9620	45	850	40	Si	40	22573	995 i	44

Source: Narendra Prasad, *Women and Development*

Several analysis have found that access to credit programs whether through micro finance organizations or Rotating Savings Credit Association (ROSCA) has a positive effect on female empowerment (for a study in Kenya ,see Anderson and Baland, 2002;for a study in Bangladesh, see Hashemi, schuler and Riley, 1996).Studies have also found a positive link between empowerment and contraceptive use (for a study in karnataka, see sadanand and Hashemi, 1994). author says about only for women empowerment so that's why we are study about the women empowerment through panchayati raj program.

This table shows that the variation highest at the lowest sung level of gram panchayats, ranging from 15% to 45%. The best state in terms of highest participation is Bihar in followed by the Karnataka and Kerala, Sikkim and west Bengal. The table also shows below 33% women elected panchayati raj representative in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Assam.

Political Empowerment of Women Representation In Parliament

Political representation was initially based on the premises that it deal's primarily with individuals, regardless of sex and equal opportunities should be granted for power and influence in society. However, as is apparent that representation of women in the lok Sabah has not crossed 10%.

Table-2
Number of women elected to Lok Sabah

General election	No of women elected	Percentage
First	22	4.4
Second	27	5.4
Third	34	6.7
Fourth	31	5.9
Fifth		
Sixth	19	3.4
Seventh	28	5.1
Eighth	44	8.1
Ninth	28	5.29
Tenth	39	7.02



Eleventh	40	7.02
Twelfth	44	8.07
Thirteenth	49	9.02
Fourteenth	45	8.25

Source: 'women's development in India.

Many of the barriers women empowerment and equity life. In cultural norms many women feel these pressures, while others have become accustomed to being treated inferior to men. even if men legislators NGOs etc, are aware of the benefits women's empowerment and participation can have many are the scored of disrupting the status of us and continue to let societal norms get in the way of development. Researches shows that the increasing access to the internet can also result in an increased exploitation of women

Releasing personal information on websites has put some women's personal safety at risk. In 2010 working to online Abuse stated that 73% of women were victimized through such areas. Recent studies also show that women face more barriers in the work place than do men, Gender-related barriers involve sexual harassment unfair hiring practices are progressing and an equal pay where women are paid less than men are for performing the same job. Such barriers make it difficult for women to advance in their work pleasure receive fair compensation for the work they provide.

Research Findings

Despite reservation for women, effective participation in PRIs have failed due to misuse and manipulation by the local power-brokers. Ignorance of women about their rights and procedures and about their potential and responsibilities have kept them far behind men in the local bodies. It is very much doubtful that mere increase in the number of reserved seats for women in local bodies is likely to increase the participation of women. Unless structural changes are brought about, a sincere effort is made to educate women and the power structures existing in rural areas are neutralized, nothing much can be achieved. Women representatives often run into barriers (especially of family and society) and are hindered from participating effectively. They feel inhibited to speak especially when they are in large male dominated assemblies. Those who muster up enough courage and strength to speak receive very little respect or attention. It has been observed that women are invited only to complete the quorum. Further, the officials also pay heed to the needs of upper class women in preference to the needs of peasant women. The rights of women thus getsystematically nullified by the local bureaucracy

Individual Weaknesses Of Women Representatives

- Illiteracy and low education levels of the majority of the women elected members.
- Overburdened with family responsibilities Introversion due to the lack of communication skills.
- Poor socio-economic background with which the women have come into the system and poor capacity building.
- Male family members and also leaders from the caste group/community come in the way of the affairs of the Panchayats.
- Misguidance by the local bureaucracy and Apprehension of no-confidence motion by the other elected members of the system.

Mounting pressure from the political party which has vested interests in the gender reservation for positions in the PR system. The Reservation is not enough because a woman representative lacks qualitative participation due to both internal and external factors. Woman's empowerment



is not something which can be handed over to women only. This is a process which involves sincerity, earnestness and capacity and capability on the part of both men and women. It is a challenging task in village India as even today she cannot take any independent decision. She feels subordinate to her husband and even to her son.

Conclusion

With the establishment of PRIs in our country a woman gets an opportunity to prove her worth as a good administrator, decision-maker or a good leader. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a milestone in this regard. It provides women a chance to come forward. This experiment is proving to be a big success particularly by providing opportunity to women to come out of their houses and participate in administrative and political field. It has to be considered that the inclusion of well qualified women in village Panchayati at the initial state of the interlocution of Panchayati Raj Institution in rural areas would be an important instrumental measure in planning for improving social status and empowering women. Women constitute half of the population of our country. It is our duty to encourage the women in such a largest democracy of the world. To give a proper status to the women, Government, NGOs, and Universities have to play a vital role in this field. This group of women, if provided representation at village Panchayati level can strongly rise and handle the issues related to the betterment of women, can play dominant role in decision making process and make suitable recommendation for improving the status of women in the meeting. It creates opportunities for women to exercise more control over design and provisions of services and the management of resources it may benefit. Good number of women competing with the men in local politics, forwarding gender related agendas is looked as a way towards the gender equity.

In the end the reservation for women in panchayats will be good step but it should be supplemented with effective measures that ensure the qualitative aspect of women's participation. The India Panchayati Raj Report 2011 reveals: "Women's expectations and hopes for a greener, cleaner, responsive and representative politics have gone up. They will send out more clearly and energetically the message of women's empowerment and social development. For that reservation needs to be accompanied by considerable amount of affirmative action programme." To influence and lead effectively, women representatives must develop and use legitimate power (authority). To empower is giving women the capacity to influence the decision-making process by integrating them into our political system.

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