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## Panchayati Raj and Empowerment of Women

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### Abstract

with the introduction of 73rd and 74th amendment of the Indian constitution ,it was expected that it will bring a revolutionary change in the status of women and will not only empower the woman but will also empower the Panchayati Raj institutions by ensuring due representation of every segment of our population. Now its right time to analyse the situation of women empowerment and participation in india. Women have definitely surged a head in their participation in politics but most of them are still unable to come out of shadow of their male counterparts. Some times ,this participation may be just symbolic but it has been able to encourage a large section of women to have active participation in the political process .

**Key words-** Panchayati Raj. structural, symbolic, Passivity.

### Introduction

The representation of women in the village administration has brought about a strategic shift in the functioning of grassroots democracy. The changing situation in socio economic structure of society has created opportunities for the Indian woman to actively participate in panchayati raj. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 that grants 33% reservation for women in the panchayati raj have encouraged women to participate in the development and plan for the future of their villages. Because of increasing participation of women priorities at the village development level have changed health, child education, sanitation, socio-economic development for the better. Discussion in an open atmosphere and participation of women in the process of decision-making creates a sense and meaning to rural women.

“India lives in villages” was Gandhiji’s life mantra — village administration remained at the heart of his vision for decentralising power, uplifting more than half a million villages in which India lived, acquisition of capacity by common citizens for controlling the authority of the government and above all, for quickening the process of development so that the ordinary people were the country’s fountain-head and principal beneficiaries (Sahu, 2005:47). Jawaharlal Nehru, while signifying the role of traditional village panchayats narrates: “During the time of Rig Veda (1200B.C.), evidence suggests that self-government village bodies called ‘sabha’ existed. With the passage of time, these bodies became a panchayat (council of five persons). Panchayats were functional institutions with grassroots level governance in almost every village. The village panchayat or elected council had large powers, both executive and judicial” (Singh, 2006:17). But the British rule in India destroyed the basic structure of rural administration. Besides, the quest for panchayati raj system was getting a low response and the question of even getting the request from the local area for setting up village panchayats was limited to resident males. During the British period, the Franchise Committee set up by the British government which left the question of women’s franchise in India to provincial legislatures and linked it with the

issue of local culture and sensitivity on the subject. In the first report on the bill for the Government of India Act, 1919, the Joint Selected Committee of the British Parliament endorsed the recommendation of the Franchise Committee on the subject of women's franchise and said the "question whether women should or should not be admitted to the franchise on the same terms as men should be left to the newly elected legislative council of each province to settle by resolutions." The statutory rules made under the Act of 1919 did not make women eligible for appointment as members of the legislative councils (Buch, 2001:9). The law was modified later and powers given to the council to pass resolutions to allow qualified women to become members by election or nomination.

The question of women's participation in panchayats in Independent India had merited the attention of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974). The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) prioritised women representation in the panchayats. Internationally, the Mexico Plan (1975) and the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985) influenced India to come out with a plan with a broad-based strategy to deal with women issues and women empowerment at the village level.

### **WOMEN'S ISSUES IN PANCHAYATI RAJ POST-INDEPENDENCE**

Gandhi's dream of swaraj for well-being of people, grassroots democracy and empowerment of rural people in India was materialised with the mandatory introduction of panchayati raj system in states under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The inspiration for the introduction of 33% reservation for women in panchayati raj was the brain-child of Rajiv Gandhi. After a prolonged deliberation, as a first step, the government made the provision in the Panchayat and Nagarpalika Bill of 1992 to reserve 33% of candidature and constituencies in local bodies — panchayats, municipalities and corporations — for women (Mathai, 2006:83). The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution and inclusion of provisions under Article 243 are regarded as a watershed in the history of state initiative on political empowerment of rural women. The amendment also provided for the reservation of one-third of the total number of offices for chairpersons in the panchayat at all levels for women including women from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Due to reservation of seats, the formal participation of women in politics has gone up considerably (Datta, 2001:30). Thus

Empowerment of women in general and rural women in particular involves many factors: economic opportunity, property rights, political representation, social equality, personal rights, etc. One of the major strides for the empowerment of women in India is to empower them politically and more specifically at the grassroots village level and for this purpose, the panchayati raj system provides an appropriate forum for rural women. Such an approach provides the women a constitutional platform to raise their voices on women oppression, subjugation and related issues and thus in effect, provide them with an identity in an orthodox socio-political set-up; this, in addition, to providing a much-needed forum to seek redressal of problems directly affecting them, which is the true essence of empowerment.

### **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT BY PANCHAYATI RAJ SINCE 1992**

Women's entry into panchayats, both as members as well as heads after the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) has pushed them into the process of decision-making and policy implementation considerably. By 1994, 3,30,000 women had entered politics as a result of panchayats and many more have been elected in the last two years; the percentage of women at various levels of

political activity has shifted dramatically, that is, from 4–5% to 25–40% after 1992 (Devaki Jain). By 1999, as many as 7,68,582 women had been elected to gram panchayats, and 38,582 women to panchayat samitis (Fadia, 2006:949). There is caste assertion and good performance of dalits in India in the local administration and management. In Rajasthan, Durga Devi, a Mehtar by caste and sweeper by profession, became the sarpanch of Sarbari village in Rajasthan's Sikar district. She continued sweeping for her livelihood since her honesty prevented her from indulging in practices, which are usually adopted by persons occupying similar positions to make quick money. According to the gram panchayat secretary, 'she has the support of the whole village because she is capable. She also enjoys all the support from her husband who helps her in her ventures'. Focusing on the importance of women in the panchayati raj system, it is evident that women played the role of personality development, promotion of education, community service and solidarity, arresting alcoholism, reversal of dependence, crackdown of crimes and role reversal (Borain, 2003:521). They have exhibited their leadership in solving some of the local problems and creating facilities for betterment of rural society (Singh, 2009:25). A significant milestone has been achieved in dealing with village issues particularly water and sanitation, poverty alleviation through self-help, generating acceptance of women as leaders is the need of the hour for the socio economic equality and development of weaker section of the society.

### **ROLE OF NGOS IN THE PROCESS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

A number of voluntary organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in India have endeavoured towards the cause of women and have expanded the tradition of grassroots activism since the mid-'80s. Although NGOs do not have sufficient experience in politics, yet many have appeared on the scene as the government has been unable to deliver. The approach of NGOs are integrated and holistic in nature which can be ascertained through their work. Their first step was to create, organisation programmes for weaker section of society . Second step was to arrange training programmes in the areas of leadership development, capacity building, group dynamics and management-like perspective and third step was to engendering the panchayati raj institutions (PRI) — organising women in the areas of health, promoting and encouraging self help groups (SHGs) to help the poor and meet their urgent credit needs. Women in PRIs who have been supported and nurtured by NGOs and those who have been involved in larger people's movements have gained a more 'assertive' stance which gives them an edge over other men in the PRI process.

NGOs use women collectives such as SHGs or sanghas to create an arena for dialogue and discussion on issues that concern women and the community. However, the NGOs have been subjected to limited progress due to one or more reasons such as: corruption in panchayati raj, hostile environment. Where PRI are pitted against them and party guidelines affect the independent functioning of Panchayat members.

### **POLITICS OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION AND PROBLEMS**

In India, women's participation is generally lower either because they have been socialised differently or because they have fewer resources. An implicit assumption in these sets of arguments is that the lower levels of participation of women are mostly the result of a process of socialisation that leads them to think of political activity in a different way than men. The politics of women is in a dilemma —

should such women work merely for the improvement of women or stand for the electorate comprising both women and men? If they prioritise the women's cause, then the impediments will be from the dominated male panchayat members and village community; if they work for a common cause, the issue of women empowerment would be sidelined. Moreover, there are several fault lines in the formation of caste, tribe, religion and poverty, and there is no one approach that can be developed. Hence, the problem is complicated in determining selective beneficiaries or target groups and programmes of action.

The structural aspects, such as problems of funding and rotation of reserved women constituencies, are important hurdles in the process of independent, effective and successful functioning of a woman sarpanch.

In India, since the mandatory introduction of panchayati raj institutions, many achievements and progress have been made to empower women through the participatory democracy of panchayati raj. However, its achievement and progress is subjected to a litmus test in the light of problems and obstacles in the genuine political participation and empowerment of women. Many instances could be cited to prove this. The all-women panchayats in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Tripura and women representatives in tribal areas have become very active with progressive results. But this does not mean that all have been well. In 1995, a workshop of elected women panchayat members of these states made an embarrassing revelation that most women were surrogates for male family members and exercised no powers and functions.

In a patriarchal structure, women never enjoy justice. They are not allowed in public places and, if allowed, they face humiliation at the hands of colleagues, community members and bureaucrats and works as second fiddle to their husbands in discharging duties. Women's groups and movements have approached the state and pressurised it to frame a pro-woman policy. While the state has framed seemingly pro-women policies, these have actually not helped to break sexual stereotypes and male dominance. It has been observed that due to various reasons, which include pressures of national, international and the women's movement, studies of international aid agencies and political and electoral considerations, the state has resorted to a 'symbolic' political, electoral considerations and policy makings without bringing in any real changes in the lives of women. While this has provided the state with a pro-woman image, it has a depoliticising effect on the movement. Unfortunately, the rural women's organisations, though poorly organised are very feeble in most states to articulate their interest before the government and government officials.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION**

Empowerment of women at the grassroots level has to be cultivated to transform the state of helplessness and passivity of the social structure to a state of hope and action. Unfortunately, neither the Centre nor the state governments have put forward specific legislations to deal with the problems of women at the panchayati raj level and empower them politically. Similarly, the role of NGOs and SHGs has not proved significantly; the constitutional and legal steps are under scrutiny; and gender bias based on a patriarchal notion of sex-role stereotype obstacles the successful performance of elected women representatives in the process of political participation at the village level.

### **CONCLUSION**

Women in panchayats not only constitute the basic building block of democracy but a means for the reconstruction of India specially rural India from bottom of the society. In this context, political participation of women in India through the panchayati raj system has provided them an arena of freedom, progress, confidence, participation and exposure to the outside world. Today, the quest for the woman's role in panchayati raj is noticeable. Women have started asserting themselves leading to new kind of situation in society. Reservation of seats by the constitution has given them an unprecedented opportunity and has created conditions for a sort of social revolution. Yet, in the process of progress, there are impediments, and women are discouraged from seeking political office due to their ignorance, discriminatory attitude and practices by others, family and child care responsibilities, rigid caste structure and the high cost of seeking and holding public office. Their family members have compelled them to take up their roles in the form of proxy incumbents by the rigid boundaries drawn by the male dominated patriarchal social structure and mindset. The government is also apathetic to the problems of women at the local self-government level. Despite the constraints and criticisms, the socio-economic situation and the patriarchal value prevailing in our society, the full-grown political empowerment of women in India at the grassroots level is a difficult task but not impossible. The centuries old problems that beset women cannot be solved in one-and-half decade; however, the movement has started to revitalise and re-energise women role in the grassroots democracy, and has had some achievements on its hand. The mission of empowerment of women through panchayati raj is not a failure but a transformation and a beginning to reach the higher trajectory. In order to keep the transformation process sustainable, a fresh look should be given by which impediments will be removed to make the mission of women empowerment genuine, effective and result-oriented at the grassroots level.

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