



REVISITING WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL LOCAL GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS: INDIA'S TRYST WITH GENDER JUST LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

Democracy is misnamed without participation of the marginalized and disadvantaged sections of the citizenry in the political process. In most of democratised world women found to be the most secluded community in the political process. Democracy to be participating needs gender equality in political recruitment. Political participation and empowerment of women still continue to be the most pertinent and dominant public policy debate in India. Political participation of women in grass root democracy in India was highly deplorable till the passing of 73rd constitutional amendment of 1992. The Act for the first time in the annals of local self government provided for gender equality in grass root democracy in India. The present paper analyses the paradigm shift in nature and extent of political participation of women of India in grass root democracy in the aftermath of 73rd constitutional Amendment. The paper highlights the pioneering role of Odisha in the direction of women empowerment in grass root democracy and engendering local self governance.

KEYWORDS : Gender inequality, women empowerment Rural Local self Government, participatory, democracy, affirmative action, patriarchy, social solidarity.

Gender division of society into masculine and feminine forces women to be confined to the private sphere of life and restricts women's existence within domestic roles as wives and mothers. The male hegemony prevails in the decision-making processes both in private as well as public domains. Politics should be democratic, participatory, accountable and transparent means to bring about a just, humane and equitable society. Political system should incorporate the interests of and be accessible to all sections of society, of which women constitute half of the population. High cost of electioneering, improper and illegal practices, violence and corruption are some reasons that prevent women from participating in politics. It is high time to seek and work toward transformation of politics that would establish a decisive role for women at all levels of governance and politics.

The 73rd constitutional Amendment has constitutionalized the elected grassroots level local governing bodies i.e. Panchayati raj as the third strata of the Government structure. These are self-governing institutions that stand for a decentralized, participatory, accountable, transparent, relevant polity administration. The Amendment Acts have also set into motion a process that has made women's representation in local level decision-making a reality.

Women in Local Governance: A Historical Perspective:

The Panchayat Raj, as a system of self-governance was introduced in 1959, following the submission of Balwant Rai Mehta committee had recommended that besides 20 members of the Panchayat Samiti (block level body), there should be two women as co-opted members. This may be said to be the first official declaration for women to enter active politics at the grass roots. Following this the Odisha is one of the pioneering states in the field of Panchayat Raj initiatives in India. Soon after the independence of our country, the government of Odisha enacted Orissa Gram Panchayat Act in 1948. After the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act, 1959 was enacted and executed on 26th January 1961 in Odisha. Biju Pattanaik, when become Chief Minister during sixties, he made concrete efforts to revitalize Panchayat Raj system. He is one of the pioneers in the field of women participation in the local governance system in Odisha. In fact, during his second term as Chief Minister (1990-95) and under his dynamic leadership, Odisha became the first state in India to implement the sound Provision of 73rd constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 in advance to give ample opportunities to women by making reservation of 1\3rd seats for them including the women belonging to schedule castes and schedule Tribes out of the total seats. It also adds to the credit of Biju babu that after a long gap he conducted Panchayat Election in Odisha in the year 1992. For the first time in the history of independent India, women were given 30% reservation in three-tier PRIS in Odisha prior to implementation

of 73rd amendment act. The provision of the 73rd and 74th Amendment had far reaching consequences. At present Odisha has three-tier system of rural local self government system- the first tier being at the village level i.e. Panchayat Samiti, and the third at the district level i.e. Zilla Parishad for a period of five years. The act is most significant for the reservation for women and Schedule Caste and Scheduled Tribes. The present Panchayat Raj structure of Odisha includes 30 Zilla Parishad with 854 elected Zilla Parishad members, 314 Panchayat Samities with, 6,802 Gram Panchayat including 6,802 elected Sarpanch and 92,027 elected ward members constitute the rural local governance system. Thus, in Odisha now there is a total of 1,00,876 elected representatives in the three-tier rural local self governance system out of which 50% women are elected members that underlines the three-tier rural local self governance system. There are certain general features, which could be taken advantage of by women, such as direct election for membership and Sarpanch (village head or chairperson) post, at the local as well as at the block level, if the states so desired, they could make provision for reservation to the membership for chairpersons to citizens of backward classes.

Change in Political Status of Rural Women In The Post 73rd Amendment Period:

The situation created by the Act was so drastic that it brought out women straight from the kitchen into the fray of politics and with no training or experience whatsoever in public life. Women have been given power but they are not seen as political entities. They are seen as a source of status enhancement. Thus these elected women were mere fronts for their father or husbands or father-in-law or sons and very often did not attend the Gram Panchayat (village governing body) out of fear or ignorance. As a result, they are considered as proxy members or absentee members. New appellations such as "Sarpanch Pati" are used to describe husband chairperson and members of gram Panchayats, implying that they performed the Panchayats work on behalf of their wives. Elected women Sarpanch in many villages could not answer questions posed to them since their husbands would answer on their behalf.

Further, although the reservation of 33% of seats under the Panchayat Raj system has been a morale booster for women in rural India, their husband and other men in the village were yet to reconcile themselves with the women's new status. Biju Pattanaik, the most dynamic Chief Minister of Odisha was most emphatic about participation of women in the Panchayatiraj system. He announced that for the first time in the history of independent India those women will be given 33 percent reservation in the three-tier Panchayat Raj Instruction. And true to his word, he saw to it that the Odisha Zilla Parishad Act of 1991 and the Gram Panchayat Samiti

Amendment Act of 1992 were passed by the Odisha Assembly that provides for 33% of reservation for women including Scheduled caste and Schedule Tribe Women. For the first time more than 25 thousand women were elected to various Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishad. It was further provided that one-third of Zilla Parishad would have exclusively women Chairpersons. In the case of the Panchayat Samities and the Gram Panchayats, one of the two office-bearers, i.e., Chairpersons or vice-Chairpersons must be women. Chief Minister Biju Pattanaik also emphasized that all the elected representative of the PRIs should receive adequate political and administrative training. It must be pointed out that Odisha Government's policies on reservation of women were followed by many other state governments in India that culminated in the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts to the constitution. It also adds to the credit of Mr. Pattanaik that after a lapse of eight years, it conducted election to Gram Panchayat in the year 1992 for 5264 Gram Panchayat in the state. When the devolution of powers envisaged in the 73rd Amendment Acts and the women empowerment scheme implemented, these were already incorporated in the Chief Minister of Odisha Biju Pattanaik. In Odisha, the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution has conferred constitutional status to PRIs have emerged as the powerful institution in bringing about rapid and sustainable development and socio-economic transformation in rural Odisha.

Overawing some of the empirical works on empowerment of women in Panchayatiraj System in Odisha, specially works of Snehalata Panda (1996, 19999), Bidyut Mohanty (2000), Sachidananda Sathpathy (2002), Dayanidhi Parida (2010), it is revealed that:

- The women who reluctantly entered into politics showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and increasing of their role and responsibility.
- Due to strong caste feelings women belonging to upper caste have not come forward to represent the Panchayat which provides an opportunity to the women from the labour and lower caste to emerge as a potential force in village politics.
- About 80-90 percent of women attend the Panchayat meetings regularly. Given the sure number, one might conclude that the democracy has become participatory than before at least at the grass root level.
- The socio-economic background of these women showed that majority of them came from the lower income group particularly at the village Panchayat level.
- The working culture of the Panchayat has changed because of the presence of the women.
- A part of the increase of the female literacy rate can attribute to the presence of the women in Panchayat and their willing of get educated.
- The standard of political institution at the grassroots level has not been lower because of women reservation.
- Women are not only working for women's development but also really putting their interest in general matters and getting success also. So, the concept that women cannot lead in developmental processes is found wrong.
- With great effort the women leaders did the development works and the files were maintained perfectly and the government institution was followed with greatest care.
- The involvement of women leaders in different developmental works definitely increased their awareness and confidence in themselves.

The role of women leaders in developmental process is a mixture of some sort of harassing and meaningful. It is found that, due to illiteracy and poor socio-economic status the women leader could not assert their influence on the decision-making process. Though reservation has made women able to participate in the electoral process of the local-self governance system in a large way, women leadership has come under immense pressure due to the criminalizing Panchayat election including harassment and murder. For instance, Dalimba Sahu was elected ward member uncontested

in her village in Kalahandi district. But she faced an unimaginable pressure to cast her vote for the election of Naib Sarpanch. When Dalimba refused to buckle under pressure, she was kidnapped and kept captive for five days away from her family. Second instance, Anjana Dehury was a popular candidate in her Gram Panchayat in Keonjhor district. When she stood for the post of Sarpanch in the Panchayat election of 2007, it was not acceptable by her husband that she should enter the election fray. The consequence was that Anjana was killed by her spouse.

Due to social tradition of male superiority, women leaders are not getting any chance to defend their voice before elderly male person. They are feeling shy while talking in a meeting. Women leadership faced tremendous pressure in their normal functioning as power-hungry male members did not accept them at par,

The percentage of women at various levels of political activities dramatically, but it is found that women were still not able to exercise their power, in many cases they were just rubber stamps either in the hands of their family members or in the hands of their senior party members.

However, the above instances do not mean that women leaders in Panchayatiraj System in Odisha became failed. In Odisha, women made the Panchayat different. The 73rd Amendment of 1993, providing reservation for women at grassroots level, has gone long way in the empowerment of Indian Women. While Odisha's wonder women explain more about the social transformation and the difference it had made in rural Odisha. Some instances are there:

As Litali Das, a social activist works with women's issue, cites some instances.

1. In 2009, in Nuapada District of Odisha, some women Panchs in Boden Block wanted to convince a Gram Sabha. But the Block Development Officer was not convinced. The ladies then showed him the Odisha Panchayatiraj manual that stipulates the mandatory holding of Gram Sabhas at least four times a year. The BDO capitulated.
2. In another instance, Sangeeta Nayak, Sarpanch of Borda Gram Panchayat in Kalahandi District mobilized around 3000 people to block the Collector's path. They got a doctor appointed in the village primary health centre that had not seen a doctor for years.
3. Similarly Nayana Patra, a lady ward officer in Baruna Garm Panchayat in Dhenkanal District has set an example in improving the educational system in her village (the school drop-out rate has since declined considerable) and in protesting local forests.
4. In Koraput District, when Smt. Aparjita Sarangi, the District Collector started a movement in the district called "Jagarana Aabhiyan" where the women took true leadership in empowerment themselves along with others in the district. The women leaders from the village were given a special power of police by administration. The illiterate women fruitfully led the camping for total literacy and anti-addiction movement in the district.

The Orissa Nari Samaj (ONS), a state level federation of 55 block level tribal women's organization has made its presence felt during the last Panchayat elections, as 1,226 of its nominees selected through ONS has not only succeeded electorally, it has also trained these women on the PR System and equipped them to make their Panchayat a model of development. Sources of the ONS claimed that candidates picked by Nari Samaj had contested as independents. They have women 89 Sarpanch posts, 78 Samiti Sabhya posts, and 1,065 ward member posts. Thread, the Odisha based training institute which initiated these organization 12 years ago had trained over 1100 tribal women intensively in three phases and exposed another 1500 men and women to a number of workshops on Panchayatiraj. The 55 block level tribal women's organizations selected these tribal women and some men for contesting 2007 Panchayat Elections, supported their social and

development activities in the village for last two years. Thus, the grass-root level tribal women's organizations also involved in the process of social developmental in their respective communities have now come out successful to be actively involved in the political process ensuring active participation in the decision-making through Panchayatiraj (Achievement news, March 21, 2007).

It is reported by the then State Election Commission Mr. Sanjiv Chandra Hota, that in the last Panchayatiraj election (2007) in Odisha, 32,100 ward members, and 101 Sarpanchs have been elected uncontested which has a very good sign of communities reposing faith on community leadership without differences. Portraying the Gram Sabha as the "heart" and Gram Panchayat as the "brain" of the PRS, he said that "Gram Swaraj" can be realized through this PRIs and Odisha Nari Samaj. Tribal women organization in the state are sufficiently prepared through various experiment training and political parties need to be kept out and this can be done if organisation and service minded outfits as well as individuals take position at the grass-root level.

A nationwide study on Elected Women Representative (EWRs) commissioned by Ministry of Panchayatiraj in 2007-08 had concluded that the earlier notion of women being mere proxies for male relative have gradually ceded space to the recognition that given the opportunity to participate in the political system, women are as capable as their male counterparts. EWRs have used their office not only to mainstream gender issue but also address the developmental needs of the communities as a whole and also issue such as health, sanitation, early childhood care, drinking water etc., that have a special impact on the lives of women (information given by the minister PR Sri V. Kishore Chandra Deo in a written reply in the Rajya Sabha).

In a bold move with far reaching impact on electoral politics at the grass-root, the Odisha Governments has made 50 percent reservation for women in Panchayatiraj institution to achieve gender quality in the representation in Panchayatiraj bodies. The state legislature unanimously gave its nod to the Odisha Panchayat Laws (Amendment) Bill 2011, by amending the Odisha Gram Panchayat Act, 1964 Odisha Panchayat Samiti Act and the Zilla Parishad Act enhancing the quota for women from existing 33% to 50% February 2011 in the three-tier Panchayat bodies (The Economic Times, 8.4.2011). By amending the Panchayat laws, the Bill also provided reservation of the seats and office of the Chairpersons for two terms as it was felt that the operation of single term did not attract more candidates. The experience of first term would be useful in the second term for the women to prove themselves as the true representative of women as well as the entire community. It was implemented in the PR election in February-March 2012. This was being done in view of the efficiency, ability and success shown by women in various spheres and in order to take forward and empower of women in decision-making process at local self government. However, those examples of women's empowerment in Odisha are very scanty. It requires a lot for their empowerment. The Odisha PR Department and thus United Nation Entity for Gender Equality Empowerment of Women (UN Women) have signed an agreement for promoting women's political leaderships and empowerment the elected representative in the local government. At present the programme is being implemented in six states, i.e. Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan. The main objective of the programme are capacity building of the elected women representative of the Gram Sabha level, research and policy advocacy to address the legal and political issues pertaining to local self governance and evolution of a centre of excellence. (The Telegraph 17.7.20112)

Women are not interest in political and have no time to go to meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party processes. The analysis of reemerging pattern of women leadership at Panchayats has revealed that elected women Sarpanch were less than 50 years of age. They mostly belonged to

the age group between 25 and 45 years. Almost all of them were married. This dispels the myth that rural power is the monopoly of the aged. A substantial number of women members, particularly at Gram Panchayat Level, were illiterate or partially illiterate. But now many well-educated women are taking part in politics. Initially there was a preponderance of women representative from well to do dominant caste group. Now women from backward classes and low caste are effectively mobilized to participate. Almost half of the women representatives are from lower caste and tribal, 30% are from families below the poverty line, 14% are from landless families and 22% are working as hired labour. Reservation of seats has enabled not only the poor and marginalized women but also the women from conservative minority section. In Kanpur, where Muslim women had to defy fatwa's (an order by religion) to fight election, 14 Muslim women won from 30 women reserved seats in the corporation election. Reservation of seats has given these women an opportunity to demonstrate their deep political consciousness and interest in obtaining power. For them, politics and election are very practical routes out of poverty and are instrument of social change. The findings also dispel the myth that only Hindu well to do and upper class women benefit from the reservation.

Statistical Data Related To Panchayat Raj In Odisha-2017

SL.NO	PARTICULARS	STATISTICS
1	Total No of Districts	30
2	Total No of Zilla parishad members (District office)	354
3	Total No of Zilla parishad women members	457
4	Chairman of Zilla Parishad	30
5	Women Chairperson of Zilla Parishad	21
6	Total No of Panchayat Samiti (Blok Office)	314
7	Total No of Panchayat Samiti Members	6800
8	Total No of Panchayat women members	3547
9	Chairman of Panchayat Samiti (Blok Office)	314
10	Women Chairperson of Panchayat Samiti (Blok Officer)	189
11	Total No Gram Panchayats	6801
12	Total No of Gram Panchayat Members	92027
13	Total No of Gram Panchayat Women Members	48968
14	Chairman of Gram Panchayat	6801
15	Women Chairperson of Gram Panchayat	3494

Data Showing Caste Wise Representation For The Post Of Sarpanch Of Women And Others In Panchayat Elections-2017

SI No.	DISTRICT	Total no,of panchayat where elections are to be held	reserved seats for women sarpanch	Open seats for sarpanch
1	ANGUL	264	39	225
2	BALASORE	432	72	360
3	BALANGIR	356	39	317
4	BARAGARH	286	32	254
5	BHADRAK	272	54	218
6	BOUDH	78	9	69
7	CUTTACK	452	79	373
8	DEOGARH	74	4	70
9	DHENKANAL	249	37	212
10	GAJAPATI	154	5	149
11	GANJAM	603	100	503
12	J.S.PUR	242	44	198
13	JAJPUR	369	58	311
14	JHARSUGUDA	84	6	78
15	KALAHANDI	337	27	310
16	KANDHAMAL	171	0	171
17	KENDRAPADA	307	58	249
18	KEONJHAR	306	9	297
19	KHURDA	232	42	190

20	KORAPUT	240	0	240
21	MALKANGIRI	111	0	111
22	MAYURBHANJ	404	0	404
23	NAWARANGPUR	189	0	189
24	NAYAGARH	241	45	196
25	NUAPADA	143	12	131
26	PURI	332	64	268
27	RAYAGADA	182	0	182
28	SAMBALPUR	142	4	138
29	SUBARNAPUR	122	13	109
30	SUNDARGARH	279	0	279
	TOTAL	7,653	852	6,801

Total No of Seats reserved for women from S.C Category 526

Total No of Seats reserved for S.C Open Category 953

Total No of Seats reserved for women from S.T Category 1385

Total No of Seats reserved for S.T Open Category 2,632

Total No of Seats reserved for women from O.B.C Category 731

Total No of Seats reserved for O.B.C Open Category 1,380

Total No of Seats reserved for women from Open Category 852

Total No of Seats reserved for Open Category 984

Total No of Seats reserved for women Sarapanch 3,494

Total No of open Seats for Sarapanch 6,531

Total No of Gram Panchayats where elections are to be held 10,025

Across the country today, there is a marked presence of women in the Panchayats. There are estimated more than 10 millions women in all three tiers of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI). Thus, the positive discrimination of PRI has initiated a momentum of change. Women's entry into local Government in such large numbers has shattered the myth that women are not interested in politics and have no time to go to meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party processes. The analysis of emerging patterns of women leadership at Panchayats has revealed that elected women Sarpanch were less than 50 years of age. They mostly belonged to the age group between 25 and 45 years. Almost all of them were married. This dispels the myth that rural power is the monopoly of the aged. The younger generation of women opting for political representation is a sign of change. A substantial numbers of women members, particularly at Gram Panchayat level, were illiterate or partially illiterate. But now many well-educated women are taking part in politics. Initially there was a preponderance of women representatives from well to do dominant caste groups. Now women from backward classes and low caste are effectively mobilized to participate. Almost half of the women representatives are from lower caste and tribal, 30% are from families under poverty line, 14% are from landless families and 22% are working as hired labour. Reservation of seat has enabled not only the poor and marginalized women but also the women from conservative minority sections. In west Bengal state a large number of Muslims have been elected in the Panchayats. In Kanpur, where Muslim women had to defy fatwa's (an order by religion) to fight elections, 14 Muslims women won from 30 women reserved seats in the corporation elections. Reservation has given these women an opportunity to demonstrate their deep political consciousness and interest in obtaining power. For them, politics and elections are very practical routes out of poverty and are instruments of social change. The findings also dispel the myth that only Hindu well to do and upper class women benefit from the reservations.

The Affirmative Action on General Status of Women:

Reservation policies clearly have a strong impact on women's representation. Women participate more in the political process in Gram Panchayat in which seats are reserved for women. In that Gram Panchayat, there are significantly more investments in drinking water, road construction, health, public toilets etc. Women representatives devote more energy to women-specific issues than men do, and to are more successful in passing legislation on women's issues when they propose them.

Women's experience of being involved with the PRI has transformed many of them. They have gained a sense of empowerment by

asserting control over resources, officials and most of all, by challenging men. They have become articulate and conscious of their power. Despite their low-literacy level, they have been able to tackle the political and bureaucratic system successfully. They have reported regular attendance at Panchayats meetings. They have used their elected authority to address, critical issues such as education, drinking water facilities, family planning, facilities, hygiene and health, quality of health care and village development. They have also brought alcohol abuse and domestic violence on to the agenda s of political campaigns. In these and other ways, the issues that women have chosen differ from conventional political platforms,-which are usually caste /ethnic /religion based.

The visionary leader of Odisha, Biju Pattnaik for the first time in the history of independent India, announced that women will be given 33% reservation in the three-tier rural governance system. Since he was most emphatic about the participation of women in the rural local governance system i.e. Panchayati Raj institutions. According to his announcement, the Odisha Gram Panchayat Act 1964, the Odisha Panchayat Samiti Act 1959 were amended by Odisha Assembly during 1991 and 1992 and the Odisha Zilla Parishad Act, 1991 was enacted by the Odisha Assembly in 1991 and that provided 33% reservation for women in conformity with the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act 1992.

As a mandate and according to the above constitutional and legal provisions, the general Panchayat elections were held in Odisha during 1992 and a total of 28,069 women representatives were elected for the first time to the 3-tier rural local governance system from 5,262 Gram Panchayats. This is the first Panchayat election in Odisha where such a large number of women representatives were elected to the 3-tier structure of rural governance system to participate in the local governance system.

CONCLUSION:

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that affirmative action in favour of women has added a new dimension to their empowerment discourse reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj institution has not only promoted gender equality but has brought a great change in the status of rural women, empowering them in terms of self confidence political awareness, political participation and affirmation of a definite identity more affirmative action of women without an enabling environment specifically change of mind set of well founded patriarchy will certainly create an empowerment vacuum. Again the effected rural women political executive, are more increasingly shuddered with proxy presence, the 'Sarpanch Pati' syndrome has virtually claimed the empowerment of women, exposing the ground reality of the women, exposing the ground reality of the women empowerment in the local bodies, needs to equip them through various capacity building initiative by Government and so as to enabling them to hold informal discussion understand the conflicting currents of various dynamics providing them proper education and in skill development training. So that they can battle and challenges most effectively various studies have explored that a majority of women PRIs are illiterate they grapple with inconvenience. The need of the hour into well equip them to face various functional challenges. To sum up engendering rural local governance an India still continue to be a distant reality owing to various functional and societal challenges. In Odisha too even after two and half decades the rural local bodies have failed to be truly gender sensitive however, the need of the hour is operationalization of the affirmative action through a multistate holder approach.

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