



## Empowerment of Women Through Panchayat Raj Institutions: A Study of Backward Class Women in Anantapuramu District of Andhra Pradesh

### KEYWORDS

**A. Krushnamma**

Research Scholar, Department of Rural Development & Social Work Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapuramu – 515 003 (A.p.)

**D. Chenna Reddy**

Department of Rural Development & Social Work Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapuramu – 515 003 (A.p.)

**ABSTRACT** *The study analyzes the extent of participation of backward class women elected representatives in Panchayats in Anantapuramu district of Andhra Pradesh, The data was analysed by using simple statistical tools such as averages and per centages. The analyzed data was used to prepare the research paper from which inferences were drawn and conclusions arrived at. The author opines that the ongoing literacy programmes should specifically cover illiterate women members of Panchayats.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Decentralization as a political phenomenon is interpreted as a means to make the State more responsive and adaptable to the local needs than that it could be with concentration of administrative powers and responsibility of the state. More specifically, decentralization is referred to as a process of sharing of powers by the Central ruling groups with other groups, each having authority within a specific area or the State. From the point of view of norms, it means presence of formal political structures for each defined area representing a combination of local as well as central interest, who exercise the powers of decision making at the local level and such allocation of powers is protected by formal as well as normative rules accepted by the Centre. The process of decentralization involves both administration and the government as it involves delegation of powers to the lower levels in the territorial hierarchy; this could be within this State or in the offices within the large scale organization.

Even though an important aspect of State's functioning in an area, Decentralization is not confined to the territorial hierarchy alone. From the practical point of view, hierarchical prescription of functions and powers would not be able to give satisfactory results if these levels are not equipped with powers of taking decisions and implementing them. Decision making aspect is important for determining the forms and extent of decentralization depending upon which decentralization may have at least distinct alternatives, viz., deconcentration, delegation and devolution.

Deconcentration refers to the physical dispersal or shifting of the offices or the seats of decision making, whereby decision makers are located closer to the activities and persons for whom they work. But they continue to be accountable to the central authority. Retention of accountability to the central authority does not mean that powers are not transferred to these offices. Shifting of seats of decisions making may be supplemented by the transfer of power of decision making although the decision making power may or may not be enlarged.<sup>4</sup>

#### 2.1 Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To study the extent of participation of backward class women elected representative in Panchayats;
2. To explore the awareness, interest, and involvement of women in Panchayat elections;
3. To know the leadership qualities of backward class women;
4. To assess the perception of women about the Panchayat

system in general and their role in particular; and

5. To find out the factors which tend to promote or prevent women members from performing their roles.

### 2.2 Methodology

Keeping in view the objectives of the study the data for the present study is collected both from primary and secondary sources. The primary data is collected by administering by administering a pre-tested Interview Schedule. The Interview Schedule is intended to elicit the opinions of sample women representatives on various functional facets as well as empowerment facets. The secondary data is collected from the published books, journals, periodicals, published reports, action plans, unpublished thesis, official documents, brochures and official records. Data also collected from various offices like District Panchayat Office, Zilla Parishad Office, Mandal Offices and Research Institutions.

#### 2.2.1 Analysis of Data

The collected data/information was analysed by using SPSS package. The data was analysed by using simple statistical tools such as 'averages' and 'percentages'. The analysed data was used to prepare the report from which inferences were drawn and conclusions arrived at.

#### 2.2.2 Sample Design

In Anantapuramu district there are 4482 elected women representatives at three-tiers of Panchayat institutions. Among them 1277 constituting 28.39 percent of total women representatives belong to backward class community. So there are 1151 BC women representative members and 126 BC women heading the Panchayats. For in depth study on the functioning style and the empowerment impact of Panchayat Raj institutional participation, 33 per cent (380 members) of elected BC women representative members i.e. Ward members, MPTCs, ZPTCs and 66 per cent (83) BC women heads i.e. Gram Panchayat Presidents and Mandal Parishad Presidents were selected by simple random sampling method. Care was taken to cover all three revenue divisions of the district. So the universe of the study constitutes 463 Backward Class women representatives.

#### 2.2.3 Study Area

Historically, Anantapuramu district has been a perpetually drought prone area. The district is also backward socially and economically when compared with the other districts Kurnool, Kadapa and Chittoor in the Rayalaseema Regions, and other Coastal districts of the State. Geographically, Anantapuramu district has been one of the largest districts in the state covering an area of little more than 19,000 square kilometers.

In Anantapuramu district Panchayat Raj Institutions are working since 1959. The changes that have brought in the functioning of Panchayat Raj Institutions at state level from time to time brought changes in the district. After the enforcement of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act the Panchayat Raj Institutions in the district are administered in accordance with Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act of 1994. In Anantapuramu district there are 10280 Gram Panchayat wards. Among them 3772 are women members, which constitute 36.69 percent. The total Gram Panchayat Presidents in Anantapuramu district is 1001, out of which 334 are women. They constitute 33.37 percent of total Gram Panchayat Presidents. In Anantapuramu district the middle tier Panchayat is known as Mandal Parishad. The President of Mandal Parishad is indirectly elected by Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency (MPTC) Members. In the district total number of MPTCs is 797. Among them 324 women got elected in 2006 Panchayat elections. Some of the women got elected from unreserved seats as such they constitute 40.65 percent of total MPTC members. The total number of Mandal Parishads in the district is 63, out of which 27 constituting 42.86 percent are women. The upper tier of Panchayat in the district is Zilla Parishad. The President of Zilla Parishad is indirectly elected by Zilla Parishad Territorial Constituency (ZPTC) Members. In all, there are 63 ZPTC members in the district. Among them 25 constituting 39.68 percent are women.

### 3. Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are as follows:

1. As per the study the representation of women in the Lok Sabha has basically remained stagnant. It reached a "high" of 15.51 per cent in 1991. This figure has not been crossed since then.
2. The study indicates that nearly half of the sample women representatives motivated by the family members. The prevailing local political conditions and influence motivated 21.81 per cent of the sample. The national, state and local political leaders inspired 14.04 per cent of sample women representatives. Only 9.51 per cent of the sample entered into politics by their own choice. By influence of a particular social or political incident motivated 4.75 per cent of the sample.
3. As per the study it is regrettable to note that a preponderant majority i.e. 55.94 per cent of sample women representatives are unaware of even three layers of Panchayat Raj Institutions. The Knowledge on minimum age of 18 years to cast vote in elections is confined to 49.89 per cent of total sample. On the other hand the knowledge of minimum age of 21 years to contest in elections is limited to only 34.56 per cent of the sample BC women respondents. About 29.37 per cent of the sample is able to give exact or nearly exact figures of reservations given to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes and women in PRIs. The sample BC women are quite unaware of IX Schedule of the Constitution. Important functional are known to 44.06 per cent of sample. Two child norm to contest in PRI elections is known to 41.04 per cent of the sample.
4. The study shows that most of the female members (73 per cent) came to the election without any previous experience. Among general BC women representatives as many as 81.84 per cent of the sample have no previous political experience.
5. It is evident from the study that the maximum experienced female members are found among BC women heads of PRIs than the general BC women representatives. Except less than 5 years experience the BC women heads of PRIs dominating the scene.
6. The study shows that nearly 60.91 per cent of women members expressed their views that they are honoured more after elected as members. There are few members (39.09 per cent) who opine the opposite.
7. It is clear from the study that a preponderant majority of sample women representatives have membership in one political party or other. About 9.72 per cent of them are not associated with any regional or national political parties.
8. It is clear from the study that full support has been rendered by the family towards 45.14 per cent women members and 9.94 per cent women members do not get any support from her family. A significant portion of the women members (31.53 per cent) are getting help from their husbands without any interference.
9. As per the study most of the sample women representatives have concentrated on encouraging women to take part in MGNREGS works. The second priority of all women representatives is formation of Self-Help Groups. The sample representatives on immunization programme as third important activity undertaken for the development of women. The sample women representatives have taken the initiative joining women patients in private hospitals for treatment of various diseases. Nearly 5.83 per cent of sample women representatives helped fellow women in the construction individual sanitation toilets. Few women representatives helped fellow women to get benefits under National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS) and Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) scheme.
10. The study reflects that most of the women members i.e. 71.06 per cent have done nothing for the women beyond schemes. Only 28.94 per cent members have done works other than schemes which is welcome move.
11. The study denotes that 95.68 per cent of women want to use their power in positive direction. Some of them want to do developmental work or Social development. They also want to use their power in supplying basic minimum needs for the poor and also in Economic development of the women. Majority (33.69 per cent) of the representatives have exposed their wish to use their power for social development i.e. working for Education, Health etc. Remaining 4.32 per cent of female members told that they don't want to use their power.
12. As per the study nearly 61.12 per cent of female members know the programmes regarding women and child development and remaining 38.88 per cent members do not know the programmes.
13. It can be found that 21.17 per cent general women representatives told that they communicate with the people talking with each household. About 28.94 per cent of sample women representatives confessed that they communicate with the village people through party workers. Nearly 26.13 per cent of women representatives informed that they communicate the people through participation in Gram Sabha. Some women representatives (10.80 per cent) confessed that they communicate with the people through husband or any male family member.
14. The study indicates that among 463 women representatives nearly 26.99 per cent of women representatives have got the training either government or party or NGO. And remaining 73.01 per cent have not got training. This denotes that a significant number of women representatives are uncovered by the knowledge and skill support. But surprisingly 22.89 per cent of women representatives have got the reading materials.
15. It is clear from the study that the structural constraints faced by sample women representatives are minimal. The other constraints include inadequate financial allocations, lack of monitoring and supervision, male intervention, party intervention etc are the major constraint in discharging the duties properly by sample BC women representatives.
16. The study reveals that nearly 54.43 per cent of BC women representatives reported that the PRI membership has positive impact on their controlling power over resources. Among them 29.59 per cent reported marginal increase and 24.84 per cent stated significant increase in their control over resources. The women who declared no change in their control over resources is also quite alarming. Nearly 40.39 per cent of BC women representatives declared that there is no change in their con-

trolling power over resources.

17. The study indicates that nearly 68.90 per cent of sample BC women stated that there is some amount of change in their self confidence levels due to PRIs membership. Among them 47.95 per cent reported marginal increase and 20.95 per cent reported significant increase in their self confidence levels. About 26.13 per cent of sample women declared that there is no change in their self confidence levels after being members of PRIs.
18. It is clear from the study that the PRI membership has positive impact in improving social status of 62.42 per cent of BC women representatives. Among them 44.06 per cent reported marginal and 18.36 per cent reported significant increase in their social status. Status quo in their social status is reported by 31.75 per cent of sample women representatives.
19. The study indicates that nearly 50.97 per cent of sample BC women stated that there is some amount of change in their economic security due to PRIs membership. Among them 34.77 per cent reported marginal increase and 16.20 per cent reported significant increase in their economic security. About 44.92 per cent of sample women declared that there is no change in their economic security after being members of PRIs.
20. It is clear from the study that the PRI membership has positive impact in improving making small and large purchases of 57.77 per cent of BC women representatives. Among them 34.13 per cent reported marginal and 23.54 per cent reported significant increase in their making small and large purchases. Status quo in their making small and large purchases is reported by 37.15 per cent of sample women representatives.
21. The study makes it clear that one-third of sample women reported no change in subjection to domination and violence. On the other hand 41.90 per cent of sample representatives reported marginal decrease and another 21.38 per cent reported significant decrease in subjection to domination and violence.
22. As per the study, 44.49 per cent of sample women reported marginal increase in their political and legal awareness. However, 31.32 per cent of sample women reported status quo in their political and legal awareness. In the same way 18.57 per cent stated significant increase in their political and legal awareness.
23. The study reveals that nearly 60.91 per cent of BC women representatives reported that the PRI membership has positive impact on protest and campaigning. Among them 38.66 per cent reported marginal increase and 22.25 per cent stated significant increase in their protest and campaigning. Nearly 35.21 per cent of BC women representatives declared that there is no change in their protest and campaigning.

### 1. Suggestions for Policy and Action

The results of the study showed incremental gains women members have made in most participation areas resulting from training intervention but a long way is yet to be covered and especially with respect to free women from disabling influence of purdah system, male interference and discrimination. Besides, special efforts need to be directed towards increasing awareness about PRIs, enhancing skills to participate in deliberations and improving ability to undertake different types of Panchayat work. Participation in Panchayat discussions and decision-making also needs to be further improved and greater opportunities for internal and personal development need to be made available. Suggestive measures that are outlined below are expected to bridge the gaps still remain to be bridged.

1. The constitutional provisions and legislative measures alone will not go too far in empowering women members. They themselves have to assume responsibilities, demonstrate their ability and confidence, reduce their dependence on others and prevent their interference. As the task is not easy to accomplish, the state, com-

munity, NGOs and village organisations, all have to come together to work towards capacity building of women members. This will go a long way in changing the prevalent view that women are there in Panchayats because of reservation only and that they are incapable to handle Panchayat work.

2. A large proportion of women suffer from the lack of confidence, fear of being ridiculed by males and afraid of speaking in meetings in presence of village elders. This needs to be attended sooner than later in case goals of reservation are to be achieved. Conditions are, therefore, needed to be created so that women members feel encouraged to share their views, express themselves freely, views put up by them receive due attention and shoulder some responsibilities. For this purpose, a multi-pronged strategy needs to be pursued that involves awareness generation, association with ongoing development schemes, and availment of available opportunities allowing women to demonstrate their ability. Besides, their outside exposure at frequent intervals, especially to banking, health, educational and similar other institutions, would broaden their mental horizon as also build their confidence.
3. One of the factors underlying poor participation of women members is lack of information and awareness. It makes women dependent on others and also compels them to put signatures on registers as desired by male members. This limitation can be overcome if information about PRIs and relevant rules are translated into simple language and local dialects; proceedings recorded in the meetings are read out for the illiterates before asking them to put signatures. While, the ongoing literacy programmes should specifically cover illiterate women members of Panchayats, the adult female literacy programme should be initiated in mission mode with active involvement of PRIs.
4. Results showed that the discrimination against women continues in some form. As it is deep rooted and perpetuated by patriarchy, empowering women, most of whom are economically dependent on the male folk, is an uphill task that cannot be accomplished simply by education or awareness generation. What is needed is a holistic approach combining within it measures towards economic independence, gender justice, equal access to education and health services and freedom from socio-cultural inhibitions. The scale on which such an approach needs to be pursued calls for a Special Component Plan for Women ensuring one-third of the total budgetary allocation flowing towards women development, promotion of self help groups of women promising economic independence, leadership development, and skill improvement relevant to trades meeting needs of modern markets.
5. Recognising economic independence as a key factor in empowerment of women and in ensuring them a say in the decision making process in family and society, programmes of employment generation, skill development, productivity increase and resources mobilisation need to be vigorously pursued and all the concerned departments and agencies operating at different levels need to be actively involved in a coordinated way.

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