



Political Empowerment of Women in Panchayati Raj (Odisha's Initiative Towards a Gender Just Rural Local Governance)

KEYWORDS

Political Empowerment, local self-government, gender inequality, patriarchy, taboo,

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ABSTRACT Empowerment of women in Panchayatiraj institutions has not only promoted gender equality rather has made grassroot democracy more effective and meaningful enriching social solidarity. Following the 73rd Amendment, Odisha became the first state in India going one step ahead by reserving 50%(1) seats for women in Panchayatiraj institutions

Summary of the Paper:

Political empowerment of women, the most pertinent and baffling question that dominated public policy and every development dialogue of independent India, had a break through in the year 1992 with the passing of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution. The Act Provided for gender equality in the grassroot democracy by reaching Power to the women through reservation. The present paper focuses on the Odisha scenario of women empowerment in Panchayati raj and unfolds the insight story, the continuance of gender discrimination in the local bodies of the state. However suggestions have been made to do away with the barriers.

Introduction:

Women, who constitute about one-half of any nation's population- are underrepresented in various democratically elected bodies. As they were treated inferior or subordinate to men, remained systematically marginalized in the sphere of politics too. Their participation and representation in local bodies is abysmally low. Participation of women in Panchayatiraj institutions of India virtually was nonexistent in pre-independent India and had a marginal increase in the post independence era i.e. 1960s and 70s. However, 1990s witness a remarkable progress in the direction of empowering women in the local bodies.

The initiative of the Government to engender the rural local bodies although was not impressive in the initial years of independence, but an latter stage measures were taken to improve their socio-economic and political status by involving them in the decision making process.

The 73rd Amendment heralded a new era-a mile stone in the direction of empowering rural women. This landmark initiative identified India, as the number one country in the world making local government more gender sensitive. For the first time in the annals of Panchayatiraj history of India, out of 260,000 Panchayat representatives, there are 75,000 women making India, the largest number of women in the world.⁽²⁾

Women Empowerment in PRIs of India: A Historical Perspective

Historically, however, despite their consensual appearance, these institutions were not really democratic as they were concealed forms of social prejudice, oppression and exploitation that were firmly rooted in local power structures.

It is notable that until the passage of the 73rd (3) Amendments, the suggestion for strengthening women's representation was only faintly articulated in the mainstream history of panchayati Raj. In relation to this mainstream history, the question of women's representation in panchayats has evolved in a distinct even parallel, trajectory. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee report has suggested only that

the 20 member Panchayat Samiti should co-opt or nominate two women, "interested in work among women and children"⁽⁴⁾ The Maharashtra Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act of 1961 followed this recommendation, providing for the nomination of one or two women to each of the three bodies, if no women candidate was otherwise elected. In 1978, of 320 women representatives on the Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads in Maharashtra, only six were elected, demonstrating if evidence were required that the provision of co-option or nomination was little more than an opportunity for patronage and, at best, an expression of tokenism. Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan used such provisions fitfully and at convenience with broadly similar result. The Andhra Pradesh Grama Panchayats Act, 1964 effectively provided for reservation of between 22 and 25 percent for women.

The next important milestone in the history of Panchayati Raj in India was the Asoka Mehta Committee Report of 1978. Between Balwantrai Mehta and Asoka Mehta, the Committee for the Status of Women in India, its famous report towards equality (1974), argued forcefully that rural women's needs and perspectives has never been given sufficient weight age in the plans and development policies of the Government of India. The Report recognized that cooption and nomination were under written by the assumption that women were incapable of contesting elections, and would not permit the question, much less transformation, of power equations in rural society. It therefore recommended the setting up statutory women's Panchayats at the local level, which would have strong links with panchayati Raj institutions, as well as possess some resources to manage and administer welfare and development programmes for women and children. On the question of reservations for women in legislative bodies, however the committee was divided. Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar recognized the importance of reservation as an instrument of empowerment.

The Asoka Mehta Committee Report (1978) recommended a two-tier panchayat system, in which the two women who polled the highest number of votes in the panchayat

elections would even if they failed to actually get elected, stand co-opted into the panchayat. Where no women contested elections, any two women known to be active community workers, could be co-opted. In subsequent stage other Committees like the G.V.K. Rao Committee, 1985; the L.M. Singhvi Committee, 1986 also did not make any reference to the gender inequality aspect of rural local governance.. But the issue of the representation of women and their participation in local-level institutions only came up again in the parallel stream, with the National Perspective Plan for women (1988) recommending 30 percent reservation for women⁽⁵⁾ in these bodies. The same recommendation was also made in the unsuccessful 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill of 1989, but it was only finally in 1992 that a redesigned three-tier system of panchayati Raj- along with the provisions for women's reservation in panchayat bodies at every level – was incorporated into the Constitutions by Amendment, and subsequently ratified by the states.

Meanwhile, some states were already proceeded to provide reservations for women. In 1985, Karnataka introduced 25 percent reservation for women in the Mandal Praja Parkshads, with a further reservation for women belonging to the SCs and STs. Andhra Pradesh, too had in 1986 provided for reservation of 22-25 percent for the Gram Panchayat, with two women to be-opted in the Panchayat Samitis, in addition to the elected women member, Surprisingly, West Bengal- one of the states that introduced a new Panchayati Raj system in 1978 and held elections at regular intervals- did not make any effort to encourage the participation, or even visibility, of women.

However, the 73rd Amendments to the Constitution in 1992 was stimulated by the disappointment over the failure of development programmes, due to inadequate representation of women.

The 73rd Amendment Act

The Constitutional (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, passed in 1992 by the Narasimha Rao government, came into force on 24th April 1993. It was meant to provide Constitutional sanction to establish "democracy at the grassroots level as it is at the state level of national level." The main features are as follows:

The 73rd Amendment Act and Odisha's tryst with a gender sensitive Panchayati Raj

To confirm with the provisions of the 73rd Amendment of 1992, Odisha amended its 1991 Act with effect from 1st November 1993, while the new Act for the Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samities came in to force 18th April of the following year. It provided for;

- 33% reservation of seats for women in all the three tiers and proportionately for SC, ST and general category of population.
- Even the office of the Chairpersons are reserved for SC/ST and women.
- If the Sarpanch elected / nominated of a GP is not a woman, the office of the Naib Sarpanch will go to women and the same procedure is followed for the Chairman and Vice-chairman of PS and President & Vice-President of ZP.

It is note worthy that Prior to the 73rd Amendment, the government of Odisha made provision in 1990 for reserving as many as 30% of the seats for women in the

panchayats. The 73rd amendment, however reserved 1/3 seats for women. The reservation provision is also made applicable for the SCs, STs and backward classes women from the respective quotas of the three categories. These reserve seats for women are allotted by rotation to different wards of Grama Panchayat area. Following the 1992 gram panchayat elections, there were 28,069 women members, 5,267 Grama Panchayats. However, in 1997 election following the reservation of not less than 1/3 seats for women their number went up to 28,595 in 5,261 Grama Panchayats. In 1993, there were 4,286 general Sarpanchas, 248 scheduled caste sarpanchas, 714 Schedule tribe Sarpanchas and 14 women Sarpanchas in the state. In 1997, election out of a total of 5,261 Sarpanchas in the State 475 belonged to SCs and 396 SC women, 795 STs and 569 ST women, 887 were reserved for general women and 2199 seats reserved for unreserved categories.

In 1992, the panchayat Samiti in the State had 1961 general members, 585 SCs, 876 STs, 841 women. Before the 73rd Amendment the representation of women members was substantially increased which in turn provided the base for the growth of female leadership in the state.

Following the 73rd amendment, the act of 1991 was amended in 1994. Elections to the Zilla Parishad under this act were held in 1997 which resulted in a quantum jump in women representatives in rural local bodies. The reservation provision is also made applicable for the SC, ST and OBC women from the respective quotas of the three categories. These reserved seats for women are allotted by rotation to different wards of the grama panchayat area. Following the 1992 Gram Panchayat elections, there were 28,069 women members in the 5,267 Grama Panchayats.

As per the State Election Commission data in 1997 election, the number of women representation went up to 28,595 in 5,261 grama panchayats.⁽⁷⁾ In the 2002, altogether 30068 women have been elected as word members and 292 as ZP member (SC & ST included). In 2002 elections, 2213 women (inclusive of ST & SC) have been elected as Sarpanch.

In 2007 PRI elections to the three tier local bodies the total number of women in all the three tiers are 36086 (35.78%) out of a total 100862 elected members in the 2007 elections. In 2013 Panchayat Election in Odisha, a total of 2.44 crore voters participated in the polls to elect 854 Zilla Parishad members, 6,228 Sarpanches, 6,231 Panchayat Samiti members and 87,528 ward members.⁽⁶⁾

Challenges faced by the Women elected Representatives

The women elected representatives in the PRIs of the state face various challenges, which virtually become the real peddler of crisis. The challenges are pre-eminent and create barrier for rural women to have effective and meaningful participation in the local governing institutions.

- Challenges from patriarchy, which is still dominant in rural society considers politics as unsavory game, un womanly and dirty profession.
- Functional obstacles creates barrier for women to have effective participation.
- Environmental issues such as a highly discouraging social acceptability of women in mass gathering prohibits woman to take active part in local bodies.
- Attitudinal factor such as negative attitude of male colleagues towards women, however capable she may be

adversely affect women participation in PRIs.

Conclusion :

To conclude from the above analysis it can be said that the provision of reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institution has brought a great changes in the status of rural women, which include empowerment, self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of identity. However, in Odisha as found by several studies that the prevalence of proxy presence, the Sarpanch Pati virtually becoming as "Active Member" of the Panchayats exposes the ground reality of true women empowerment in the PRIs of the state. Women need to be capacitated to conduct informal discussions, take other members into confidence and proceed with their developmental plans. Though many of them are illiterate, their voice can be heard clearly and they speak with conviction. Above all capacity building for women PRI members is need of the hour which can equip them to face various functional challenges. In Odisha particularly still a lot has to be done to make grass root democracy truly gender sensitive. Mere affirmative action by means of legislation will not solve the problem, a barrier free enabling environment is the need of the hour.

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