



Women Reservation and Local Self Government

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women reservation, local self government, empowerment.

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ABSTRACT In any society women population is close to half of the total population. For ages, no matter to which nation they belong, women in general have been suffering from agony, distress, discrimination & apathy. Women tend to be confined with domestic chores and restrict women participation and decision making in private sphere of life. They turn out to no one but their own family, friends and fellow humans. Every nation has a sordid story of women discrimination behind it. No doubt, the position and status of the women of today has improved quite significantly, however, women continue to suffer in general even now. There are women in this country who have not seen light at the other side of the corner where women are meant to be an item of decoration & child-bearing machine.

If we look at the dark side of the corner, women constitute about 50% of the population in India and 80% of the rural women are engaged in the domestic and household activities. However, some of them are also engaged in the economic activities to earn livelihood for their families. Even after fifty years of independence, they have not been able to participate effectively in various fields. If we look at the political issues we find that women are now actively entered in political life in India through the Panchayati raj system. Even though, the percentage of women in various levels of political activities in India has risen considerably, but, women are still under-represented in governance and decision-making process. Their power is restricted, as it the men who wield all the authority. Their decisions are often over-ruled by the government machinery.

Now let's look at the positive side of women reservation. No modern society can claim to be progressive without the inclusive role of women in all walks of life, leading to socio economic change and development. The Indian government has raised reservations for women in all tiers of the Panchayati raj system from 33% to at least 50%. In order to ensure this effective linkage of all the five tiers, women reservation becomes a necessity to bring the women population to participate in the country's developmental process.

With the implementation of reservation of 50% seats for women, a large number of women from rural areas of almost all categories have been given opportunity to occupy political space and are actively participating in this field. However, after 73rd Amendment Act they have started to adore the positions in PRIs. Naturally, now they are compelled to interact with the officials for the performance of their roles assigned to them.

The present article throws light on the positive as well as negative side of women reservation and participation of women in Panchayati raj system and various strategies for better involvement of women in Panchayati Raj.

INTRODUCTION

In previous times, the status of women in India was inferior to men in the practical life. However, they had a higher status in scriptures. They were considered as the perfect home maker in the world. With their incomparable quality of calmness of their mind, they can easily handle even toughest situation. Indian women were completely devoted to their families. They're preached in the names of Goddess Saraswati, Goddess Durga, Parvati & Goddess Kali. It has been found that the condition of women remains unchanged even during the modern times (with only little changes). In India, women were never given any right of liberty & equality. Their condition becomes even worse and men treated them in a humiliated manner. They were not permitted to step outside their house but also abstained from being educated. Nevertheless India is still a male dominated society, where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men.

With the changing time, Women's are considered to be the wealth of India and now a days they are contributing in almost every field and made country feel proud at every occasion. They are in front, leading the country, making mile stones and source of inspiration for many. Therefore, it can be said that India is moving away from the male dominated culture.

But, there are still some areas which need to be addressed. Like for the upliftment of weaker section of the society and involvement of women in political participation, the concept of panchayati raj has been introduced in the year 1959. This concept of panchayati raj has been developed to ensure people's participation in the development process. India has started its planned efforts to build up a sound economic structure, bring the rural and backward people in the mainstream on nation building, ensure keen interest of the people in programmes of economic development as well as of social transformation and to create a strong democratic system of governance close to the people, even in the service of the last man of the society as desired by the father of the nation, M.K.Gandhi. Bringing women into politics through the Panchayat Raj Institutions system (PRI) was an act of positive discrimination. Crucially, PRI has helped to change women's perceptions of themselves. Women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and, most of all, by challenging men. PRI has also given many women a greater understanding of the workings of politics, in particular the importance of political parties. But, some scholar has evaluated the status and position of women in the society, especially in terms of political participation. Mahi Pal's (1998) experience of a training camp

for elected women representatives in Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh indicates that the role of women in PRIs is performed by their male family members and they face a number of problems in performing the role inside and outside the household.

No modern society can claim to be progressive without the inclusive role of women in all walks of life, leading to socio economic change and development. With the implementation of provisions of the 73rd & 74th Amendment had far reaching consequences. The 73rd amendment to the constitution of India is a major step towards democratic decentralization. It has led to greater participation and empowerment of SC/ST and women in panchayati raj institution in the country. It provided for direct elections to all the seats for the Panchayat – from the village level to the intermediary block committee (Panchayat Samiti) to the district level (Zilha Parishad) for a period of five years. The act is most significant for the reservation for women & Scheduled Caste (lower caste) & Scheduled Tribes. There are certain general features, which could be taken advantage of by women. Such as direct elections for membership & Sarpanch (village head or chairperson) post, at the local as well as the block level. If the states so desired, they could make provisions for reservation to the membership for chairpersons to citizens of backward classes. India probably became the first country to reserve 50% seats for women at local self-government (LSG) level after the Union cabinet approved a proposal for a constitutional amendment bill for increasing quota for women in panchayats at all tiers. This means that about 14 lakh women will occupy 2,52,000 panchayat seats in future.

Government of India through 73 rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts reserved the one-third of seats in all local elected bodies for women as a sign of political empowerment. Over a million women have actively entered political life in India through the Panchayat Raj institutions. There are many elected women representatives at the village council level. The percentage of women in various levels of political activities in India have risen considerably, however women are still under-represented in governance and decision-making process. Their power is restricted, as it the men who wield all the authority. Their decisions are often over-ruled by the government machinery. It is crucial to train and give real power to these women leaders so that they can catalyst change in their villages regarding women.

In recent years there have been explicit moves to increase women's political participation at top level. All this shows that the process of gender equality and women's empowerment still has a long way to go. In order to ensure this effective linkage of all the five tiers, women reservation becomes a necessity to bring the women population to participate in the country's developmental process. With the implementation of reservation of 33% seats for women, a large number of women from rural areas of almost all categories have been given opportunity to occupy political space and are actively participating in this field. In one of the study conducted by R.B.Patil, titled "*Empowerment of scheduled caste and women*" A study of three vilages in Kolhapur district. it was found that there were 15 members (10 men and 5 women) in gram panchayat. The members were asked about the opinion of reservation of seat in gram panchayat. Majority were in favour of reservation. They justify as it gives equal opportunity, chance and right to everyone. As everyone has chance, the backward communities will be able to progress.

Three members have opposed reservation on the ground that untouchability has been removed, and so there should be equality to all castes. As the person from scheduled caste have no capacity, they should not occupy seats in gram panchayat body. These people go for field every day. The person on reservation seats do not attend the meetings and it requires to obtain their signatures after meetings. Whenever the seats are reserved for SC/ST/OBC/ Women. The voters do not go for voting. Those who vote for them, in such cases, it is the party which is important and not the person who belongs to sc/st or is a woman.

Impact of Women Reservation:

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 & most of all, by challenging men. They have become articulate & conscious of their power.

Despite their low-literacy level, they have been able to tackle the political & 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 & health, quality of healthcare & village development. They have also brought alcohol abuse & domestic violence onto the agendas of political campaigns. In these & other ways, the issues that women have chosen differ from conventional political platforms, which are usually caste/ethnic/religion based.

An ILO Study shows that "while women represent 50 % of the world adult population and a third of the official labour force, they perform nearly two- third of all working hours, receive a tenth of world income and own less than one per cent of world property". Therefore, reservation for women is not a bounty but only an honest recognition of their contribution to social development.

Evaluations done on women's participation in the PRIs have highlighted the following dimensions.

1. Women have responded overwhelmingly and participated with full enthusiasm in the elections and in the proceedings of the PRIs, thus exploding the myth that women were uninterested in politics and public life.
2. The women representatives generally got the support of the families during the elections and also in the performance of their new political roles. Marginalized sections like the scheduled castes and tribes saw the women from their groups as representatives of the interests of their group in the political arena, while the better-off sections saw the women from their own groups as helping to consolidate their positions.
3. The self-esteem of the women has gone up tremendously, and that is an observation that holds true across the board. The stepping of women into the public realm has long-term implications for gender relations in society and the family. There are already small but significant changes as men take over some

roles within the family when women go to attend meetings.

4. While the presence of women in these institutions over the last eight to nine years has not transformed the power structure in the rural areas in any significant manner, and vested interests have tried to use the provision for women's reservation to consolidate their position, the overall experience has been positive. Thus women are engaging in power struggles that used to be dominated by men, sometimes as actors and at other times as pawns. However, participation in the public realm for women means that marginalized groups and communities are finding a legitimate space to articulate their interests and aspirations, and the women of these groups are getting politicized, although slowly.

Inspite of implementation of act on women reservation, there are some positive impact on women and certain loopholes which needs to be addresses.

Case Studies

Mandurine Panchayat

Mandurine is situated on the left bank of the girna river on the border between jalgaon and nashik districts. Here the case of sarpanch of the village who is educated upto 4th standarad. She narrated the background of her unopposed election. There was a general agreement in the village for some time to elect her husband as the sarpanch. They thought it was his turn this time. But the sarpanch post was reserved for an OBC Woman. Then, the choice fell on her. If not the man, let his wife be elected, the villagers said. At first she reluctant but she was persuaded to accept. She accepted only because her election was unopposed. Another reason is leading family in the village has supported sarpanch candidates a number of times in the past. Therefore she accepted the offer. She wanted to maintain family tradition. She has got husband support and he was also helping in her work, particularly in dealing with the outside world – school teachers, contractors, government officials and others. But she is literate and well informed on panchayat matters. She chairs the meetings-her husband never attends meeting since he is not a panchayat member.

Another case study is of Pilkhod village which is located on the right bank of the Girna River connected to the national highway. (Mumbai-Agra road). There are 4 women among 11 members in the Panchayat. One woman is from ST, doubly deprived or excluded being a woman and a tribal. She is educated and intelligent and understands what is going on in this Panchayat. But she keeps herself aloof and avoids getting involved. She attends meetings, but avoids expressing her views. She is scared of getting involved in village politics. Among the three other women, who are all OBC, two are illiterate and rarely speak. The third woman is educated but very shy to speak in a meeting. For all these women coming to the Panchayat office sitting with seven men from different castes and age groups and taking tea with them is itself a new experience. No village woman comes to the Panchayat office on her own. She will send a male member if she had any work. Therefore, active participation by these women is difficult.

But regarding the question of women's empowerment: (a) Are women beginning to break their silence, to challenge patriarchal ideology? (b) Are they beginning to transform institutions and structures of gender subordination and inequality? (c) Are the new women in Panchayats beginning to

gain access and control over material and knowledge resources and altering their self-image? (d) Are they gaining new skills and gaining self-confidence? (e) Are they succeeding in avoiding cooption and dilution of the empowerment process by pervasive patriarchal forces with new ways of exercising power and becoming a political force?

Let us understand that how can we empower women to actively participate & involvement in decision making process because Empowerment requires full participation of the people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of the decision determining the functions and the well being of our societies. Here are some of the suggestions for the better involvement of women in Panchayati Raj for the betterment as well as the progress of the state.

- 1) An important requirement for bringing about empowerment of women is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and bearing children needs to be replaced by a feeling of equal partnership of women and men. To inculcate this, they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both.
- 2) Studies on women in politics have emphasized the contact with outside in the political process. There could be 2 ways of doing it. Firstly, interaction between enlightened rural women and illiterate elected women leaders be encouraged. Secondly, these women could be taken out to the urban areas and their interaction with educated urban elected women representatives be arranged.
- 3) There should be increased emphasis on ensuring the participation of women in the meetings of panchayat at all the levels. This is needed to promote and enhance their leadership qualities and self confidence. it will help them to perform better in panchayat to ensure their participation in the meetings. Attendance of all women must be made compulsory from gram panchayat to zilla parishad.
- 4) Incentives play a vital role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision making. it has been noticed that there are very active and enlightened women leaders at all the levels of panchayat, who have been successfully implementing the developmental scheme and have ensured their overall development. Such leaders need to be encouraged by publicizing their leadership qualities and honouring them in public meetings. It will encourage other women representatives and their success stories and good practices will get publicized.
- 5) The women should also be encouraged to organize themselves. It can be effectively used as instruments to mobilize women of the village. Some successful women's organizations can also act as a catalytic agent for encouraging women's participation in social and political activities. The government should also provide financial support and infrastructure to some of the successful women organizations to take up the responsibility of encouraging the women elected representatives.

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