

Representation through Reservation: Moving towards Inclusive Governance



Political Science

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ABSTRACT

Women belong to the marginalised groups of society and hence are not well represented in governance. Majority of them are excluded not only from citizenship and rights, but their interests and concerns in public decisions and public services are not reflected in political decision-making. Many argue that, among other things, the lack of democracy in gender relations excludes them from participating in governance. Considering this situation, the centre and state governments in India adopted the policies of inclusion by reserving seats at the cutting edge level for an equal participation of women and their empowerment. The participatory and inclusive mode of governance contribute to deepening democratisation and thereby creating a democratic space for women to involve themselves in decision making processes at the local level. Against this background, this paper seeks to analyse that to what extent reservation policy helped in increasing the representation of women in local governance and discusses the measures taken by the state government in Sikkim to achieve the goal of inclusive governance at local levels.

Introduction

Women constitute half of humanity yet their representation in politics is very dismal. They belong to the marginalised groups of society and hence are not well represented in governance. Majority of them are excluded not only from citizenship and rights, but their interests and concerns in public decisions and services are not reflected in political decision-making. Numerous challenges confront women entering politics. The under-representation of women in the political sphere is inextricably linked with the low and inferior status of women in society in India especially in the context of the declining sex ratio, increasing violence and crimes against women and their marginalized status in employment, education and health sectors (Human Development in South Asia 2000). Many feel that Indian society is still male dominated, and men are threatened by the idea of women holding senior posts. In the political sphere this is compounded by the high premium placed on political power. This makes some men even less willing to share power with women. Women's political under-representation, however, afflicts every country, regardless of its economic wealth or political system. Though women's political rights are formally recognized all over the world and codified into national Constitutions, the global average of women's share in parliament stands at a paltry 18 per cent (IPU 2009) and only 5.83 per cent of all Heads of State and Heads of Government are women. This under-representation of women in formal politics is now widely regarded as a problem and there is a growing support and acceptance for both enabling devices such as day-schools to encourage women candidates and for different types of quota systems (Phillips 1995). Many international bodies, like UN, UNIFEM (The United Nations Development Fund for Women), EU, IPU, IDEA (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) and donor agencies have recommended and have projects on women and decision-making. The Fourth World Conference on women, held in Beijing, advocated in favour of ensuring adequate representation of women in all decision-making bodies (Beijing Platform for Action, 1995). The Millennium Development Goal on gender equality lists the increase of women's political representation as a sub-goal, most attention to women's share of political authority occurs within nation. At least 103 countries today have taken some kind of political steps, like quotas in order to increase the number of women in formal politics. While these measures first emerged in the 1950s in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan there has been a rapid increase in the last decade and a majority of these steps have been taken since 1995 (Krook 2003).

Many countries in the world including India have amended their laws for fair representation of gender in the local government institutions. For women, successful grassroots experience has meant an opportunity to form a coherent voice, to be heard and to make a difference in their communities. Both the centre and state governments in India adopted the policies of inclusion by reserving seats at the cutting edge level for an equal participation of women and their empowerment. The participatory and

inclusive mode of governance contribute to deepening democratisation and thereby creating a democratic space for women to involve themselves in decision making processes at the local level. Against this background, this paper seeks to analyse that to what extent reservation policy helped in increasing the representation of women in local governance and discusses the measures taken by the state government in Sikkim to achieve the goal of inclusive governance at local levels. This study is basically based on the review of information collected from secondary sources i.e. published books, reports, research works, journals and newspapers. Some information is also collected through internet browsing.

Representation of Women in Indian Politics

Women's participation in political decision making plays a crucial role in the process of enhancing their participation in public life. Political representation is a chief means of participation in representative democratic governments (Singh 1997). The inadequate representation of women in politics however is a problem in all of the democratic countries of the world today. In India the women were given their political rights along with independence but their participation in politics is not so impressive. Unlike SCs and STs, there is no any provision for the reservation of seats for women in national and state legislatures. Therefore the representation of women in parliament and state legislature is not up to mark. A record of 59 women candidates have been elected in the fifteenth Lok Sabha election held in 2009 which account to 10.1 per cent of total, the highest ever since independence. At the state level less than 8 per cent of 4030 law makers in state assemblies across India are women. At present the average percentage of elected women in State Assemblies is 6.94 per cent, the highest being 14.5 per cent in Rajasthan and the lowest being 1.66 per cent in Manipur and Meghalaya. This figures show that the representation of women at state level is much less than the national level.

The representations of women at the local level are comparatively good after the enactment of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in 1992. These legislations guaranteed a 33 per cent reservation in the elected representatives to local government. The credit for this goes to those who have advocated the cause of affirmative action for the inclusion of women in local government for almost a decade. The fruit of their labour was the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution enacted unanimously by the Parliament in 1992. The Acts which accord the constitutional status to PRIs and municipalities ensure the equal access and increased participation of people of all categories including the women in the decentralized democratic decision-making processes. The Articles 243D (3) and 243T (3) of the Constitution states that "Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat and municipalities shall be reserved for women and such seats may be

allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat". Similarly, clause (4) of Articles 243D and 243T further provides that 'Not less than one third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the panchayat and municipalities at all levels shall be reserve for women' (GoI 1992). This provision of the reservation of seats provided by the Constitutional Act, has greatly contributed to the political empowerment of the women and other marginalized and disadvantaged communities in the society. Moreover, these legislative measures enable the both rural and urban women to participate in decentralized governance, planning and development. As a result of this provision, nearly ten lakh women occupy positions as members and chairpersons of grassroots democratic institutions in India.

The Provision of Reservation as a Part of the Inclusion Policy

India provides the most pronounced example of formal inclusion of excluded groups in local government. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992) guarantees reserved seats at all levels of local government for "scheduled castes" and "scheduled tribes" according to their proportion of the total population and women. It also guarantees to women one-third of the executive positions in the village councils. All the state governments have amended their respective legislation to enforce these provisions, with some states having made up to a 50 per cent reservation for women. The most significant feature of the constitutional amendment of 1992 has been bringing about a certain uniformity regarding representation of the weaker sections. While reservation of seats for scheduled castes and tribes has been written into the constitution from the very outset, the reservation for women is new and the most important contribution of the amendment. According to many analysts, it has brought a critical mass of women to these institutions and holds forth tremendous potential. The first round of elections to the panchayats after the amendments was held in 1994 and 1995 and nearly one million women entered the threshold of political institutions of local self-government. The institutional reforms for inclusion policy aims to enable the women, either directly or indirectly, to be more involved in the decision making process in a wider number of areas. The implementation of the reforms in India has essentially changed the basic social relations and the place of the women in the governing of the community.

The 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts which came into force in 1993 is a watershed in the field of decentralisation and political empowerment of women. The weaker sections of the society like the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women were not adequately represented in the decision making forums of local governments before the passing of this amendment. The Acts, for the first time, accords constitutional status to the local government institutions and ensure the reservation of seats for women in panchayats and municipalities. As a result of these Acts, the hundreds and thousands of women in India are taking part in community decision making processes. At present there are more than one million women representatives in different tier of panchayats across the country. The Act thus paved way for women to exercise their political rights in local self-governance and created an enabling environment for women participation in the grass-roots politics.

Reservation, inclusion and inclusive local Governance

Women's role in decision-making is one of the most important questions for consideration in the movement for their empowerment. Keeping in mind the importance of women's participation in decision-making, the Government of India has initiated efforts to expand the scope of women for participation in the development process. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 is a mile stone towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structures. These amendments provided for direct elections to reserved seats for women in local level elections. As a strategy of politics of inclusion, the amendments provided the structural framework for women's participation in political decision-making and their empowerment. This measures of government has expands the participation of historically excluded and subordinated groups in the business of decision-making processes. With the amend-

ments, the institutions became more participatory and inclusive. The inclusion of disadvantaged sections through institutional reforms ensured equality of political opportunities and has made it possible for women's inclusion in significant numbers in local government.

In Sikkim, like elsewhere, the need for affirmative action stems from the perceived underrepresentation of certain groups in certain occupational categories and their over-representation among the unemployed and the socially and economically disadvantaged. Since merger, the democratically elected state government has adopted the policy of inclusion for the socio-economic, political and educational development of the excluded and disadvantaged groups. To be more specific, from the 1990s onwards, mechanisms to broaden women's political participation and their access to representation started to appear in Sikkim within the context of the processes of democratization taking place in the state. One of the important strategy adopted by the state government in Sikkim is the politics of inclusion under which certain percentage of seats are reserved for the historically disadvantages groups for their empowerment. The implementation of the quota system in Sikkim is greatly responsible for increasing women's presence in politics. The politics of inclusion ensures those who have been historically underrepresented have an opportunity to present their claims and interests specific to their group. The Sikkim Panchayat Raj Act enacted in 1993 was first important legislation in this respect. The new Act, passed in pursuance with Central Act of 1992, has incorporated all the mandatory provisions of the Act including the reservation of seats for SCs, STs and women in panchayats (GoS 1993). The reservations were introduced accordingly in all the village panchayats and district panchayats of Sikkim. In 1997, the first election was held under this Act. The state is holding regular elections after every five years since 1988. The election held thereafter paved way for change in the grass roots structures of formal power in the village. The reservation for women in local bodies' election has made a significant beginning.

At present there are 545 women panchayat members. Of these 492 are the members of Gram Panchayats and 53 members are from Zilla Panchayats (Table 1). Out of total 545, 31 are SC women members, 230 are ST women members, 125 are OBC women members and 137 MBC women representatives. Table below shows the category wise distribution of women elected representatives of panchayats in Sikkim. Such large scale participation in public life is very encouraging trend for political empowerment of women in the state. The Panchayati Raj in Sikkim has thus succeeded in empowering marginalized groups who have gained political representation and valuable experience. Many of them have successfully taken on the challenge of governance and brought about enduring social change through their close links with the community. In Zilla Panchayats, there is two women Adhakshya and two Up-Adhakshya. Though the one-third reservation of seats in the panchayat had led to the participation of maximum rural women in the decision-making processes, but this sharp increase in the number of women members is mainly due to strategy of inclusive politics followed by the state government by increasing the percentage of seats reservation from 33 to 40 per cent in 2007 and from 40 to 50 in 2012. This has been hailed as hallmark achievement in the political empowerment of women and the establishment of inclusive local governance.

Table 1:
Category wise distribution of Women Elected Representatives (WER) of Panchayats
(as on June 2013)

Panchayat Level	No.	Total Member	WER (Total)	SC	ST	OBC	MBC	UR
Gram Panchayat	174	984	492	28	207	116	125	16
Zilla Panchayat	4	108	53	03	23	09	12	05

(Source: SGG 2012)

With the enactment of new legislation in 1993, there was a sharp increase in the number of women representatives in the state. In the Gram Panchayat's election of 1997, the first election held after the implementation of 73rd Amendment Act, 239 women members were elected out of 862 members (i.e. 28.93%) in Gram Panchayat and in 2002 election the percentage of women members went up to 32.37. Another election which was held in October 2007, 356 women members were elected out of 891 members (i.e. 40 %). In the recently held election of Gram Panchayats (i.e. in October 2012), out of 984 members, 492 were the women representatives which accounted to 50 per cent of total seats in the panchayats (Table 2).

Table 2
WER in Gram Panchayats after 73rd Amendment Act in Sikkim

Year	Total	Male	Female	% (Female)
1997	862	623	239	28.93
2002	905	612	293	32.37
2007	891	525	356	40
2012	984	492	492	50

(Sources: Chhetri 2010; SGG 2012)

Conclusion

The attempts by Sikkim Democratic Front government headed by the Shri Pawan Chamling to redress historical exclusions by 'putting people first', to use Chambers words, are praiseworthy, and the law raising the percentage of reserved seats from 33 to 50 per cent for women has opened new spaces for the exercise of direct democracy at the local level. These measures taken by

the government provide not only the opportunities for women to participate directly in the decision-making processes but it also helps in making the local government more inclusive and participatory. It is frequently argued that citizen participation will improve the efficiency and efficacy of public services. Citizen participation is meant to render local government more accountable and to contribute to deepening democracy. Hence, the policy of reservation for women, who have been historically underrepresented, ensures them maximum participation in the decision making processes. The number of women holding elected office has increased from a mere handful of exceptions to almost a half at the local levels. Women have been elected Adhakshaya, up-Adhakshaya of Zilla Panchayats, President, vice-President and Secretary of Gram Panchayats. The increase in the percentage of seats from 40 to 50 in 2012 by the government is considered as landmark in the political empowerment of rural women and the establishment of inclusive governance in Sikkim. The provision of inclusion of directly elected women members have created a new avenue to participate in the decision-making process in the only democratic institution at the grass-roots level. The strategy of inclusive measures to increase the numbers of women participating as public representatives in political institutions, such as quotas of women candidates or reserved seats in local bodies, have returned a growing number of women to public office. The greater presence of women has resulted in the inclusion of issues relating to women's rights that were previously excluded from the public and political agendas. The implementation of the quota system in Sikkim is therefore greatly responsible for increasing women's presence in politics and is considered as an important measures towards achieving the goals of inclusive governance at the cutting edge level

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