



## Rural Governance in India: Rethinking Women's Participation

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### ABSTRACT

In India when the process of decentralization was established through 73rd Amendment Act, it tried to redistribute power in favour of women through reservation of seats for them in the Panchayats. This step ensured political space for them but it did not translate into 'substantive participation' for it ignored the complex social realities operating through caste, class and gender in the society. Trying to rectify the gaps I try to present an alternative model where women would be given voices along with space. The process of gender budgeting which has been started and allocates a sum for women development works. This sum can be passed to panchayats and an implementing authority consisting of all women representatives can be made who would see that money is spent to create economic opportunities for them. In this model state has to play a major role where it sees that required structures are created for this kind of initiative. Already similar kind of model is being implemented in Kerala.

### KEYWORDS

Panchayats women caste

### Rural governance in India and women's participation

Independent India adopted a state system based on welfare model or Nehruvian state. Due to this a centralized structure was created to keep ethnic, religion, language, caste differences at bay. In order to travel the path leading to development and becoming a modern state a pool of professional cadres and bureaucrats were created. Lack of accountability and centralized power gave unchecked power to this professional cadre. It resulted in pursuance of one's own self interest keeping nation's interest aside. As a result development process received a setback and nexus with politician and bourgeoisie resulted in erosion of legitimacy of state institutions. It was now that civil society groups arose and started questioning the state apparatus. During the time of national movement itself Gandhi had relied the importance of Panchayats in the Indian state but due to host of other problems being faced by Indian state immediately after Independence, Panchayats were incorporated in the chapter on Directive principles of state policy. Since this provision was not enforceable in the courts it was left on the state whether to implement it or not. With the adoption of Nehruvian model of state and practical difficulties faced by central government various committees like Balwant Rai Mehta Committee and Ashok Mehta committee had suggested the need for Panchayats and had enumerated the functioning of panchayats. With India entering the globalized world through process of liberalization, globalization and privatization, the need for decentralization became imperative thus the process of decentralization was started in the wake of adoption of new path to development. Integration of Indian economy with the world contributed to rapid urbanization but development of rural areas was stalled. This lop-sided development in which a large number of rural masses were left out resulted in policy-makers embarking on the process of 'rural development'. The adoption of new ways of development brought citizens to the center-stage as participatory governance was adopted. It also installed 'Good-Governance' where accountability of state institutions became important. For all these, decentralization was selected as a new tool. In India democratic decentralization through top-down approach was adopted. While democratizing the decentralization India gave 33 percent reservation to the women. This occurred in the background of the report of the committee on the status of women in India (1974) and women's movement which demanded that strengthening of women's participation in all spheres of life have become imperative for development of nation as a whole. The 73rd constitution Amendment in 1992 was passed. It established three tier system of governance with Gram Sabha at the base followed by Panchayat Samitis and Zilla parishad. Gram Sabha

was composed of all citizens of a village who were eligible to vote. Thus it brought democracy at the doorstep. Along with this the amendment also mandated reserving a minimum of one-third of seats for women. The proponents of this measure believed that reservation system would lead to women's empowerment. Even after so many years of reservation, women's empowerment is still a far-fetched goal. So a policy measure is suggested.

### Gender exclusion in Panchayats: Rethinking Women's participation

India adopted the model that political presence would lead to empowerment. The whole concept of 'political presence' is developed by Anne Phillips who argued that in a top down approach quotas in politics is imperative because of the need for symbolic recognition of disadvantage group, the need for a more vigorous advocacy on behalf of disadvantage groups and the importance of politics of transformation in opening up a fuller range of policy options. On the other hand approaches of empowerment are basically a bottom-up in nature. Disempowered groups have to gain awareness of their disadvantage status and then measures to empower them should be introduced. Though both the approaches are highly normative but they are based on the assumption that structural changes would lead to improvement of their status. Further bringing women in the realm of politics would help them enjoy formal power in the institutions. This was seen as it is assumed that politics is power. Power to influence decisions would help them influence decisions, over resources etc. empowering women requires understanding the historically structures that disempower them and then rectifying those structures. But the problem with this debate was that it was teleological and secondly it did not ensure that women would get productive power which would help them in decisions.

Thus 73rd Amendment ensured women's 'political presence' but it failed to give them productive power which hindered their substantive participation. Representations of women have not automatically led to the redistribution of power nor has it necessarily raised the profile of women who often act as proxies for men's views. Improvement in their participation does not necessarily mean that women will also be effective in articulating their gender interests in public space. Visible and increased participation by women in local governments is now seen as necessary but not sufficient in addressing women's priorities. This is due to working of state and policy making which has failed to increase the 'substantive freedom' and 'capability' of women without addressing economic problems and social system which subordinates women. Mere political

empowerment has not led to a change in status of women. This can be seen in the past sixty years of India's independence where political equality has not automatically improved the economic condition and social status of women resulting in exclusion. This exclusion is propagated through various means which the policy makers had failed to take into account.

#### **GENDER INCLUSION IN RURAL GOVERNANCE: 'CREATING VOICES, THROUGH GIVEN SPACE'**

The impact of gender inequality on governance is as debilitating as it is widespread. Complicated by other intersecting hierarchies in the form of caste, class, ethnicity, religion, the differences ascribed between men and women are recreated, maintained and manipulated in contexts of state power and resources. Women thus tend to lose out in this struggle. As a result it leads to deprivation of benefits and opportunities to half of the population. Thus some important lessons have emerged from the political devolution that has been carried out in rural governance. The need for the hour is to redress the 'invisibility' of females through the 'Windows of opportunities' available to them. Here by 'windows of opportunity' I mean the political space given to them through reservations. This would have to take into account gendered perspective of governance. Unequal power relations would have to be solved to save the 'thriving democracy' in which half of the population is denied the right to dignified life. For this firstly the definition of governance need to be widened. This implies the recognition of the fact that through their emphasis on public institutions of authority, current definitions reinforces the public-private divide and makes little or no attempt to recognize the private sphere as an arena of governance. For the interaction of public-private spheres have a profound impact on women's ability to exercise their rights. Secondly engendering governance requires creating equal voices by moving beyond seeing women in higher echelons of governance, private sector, Ngo's etc. This requires that in many areas like household, labour market, members of society where women are unequal should be addressed. This requires that right kind of 'Rights theory' is pursued. Here by right kind of 'Rights theory' I mean which addresses the difference principle along with providing equality. So the best thing would be codification of needs. In this context the Human development approach would provide the right kind of parameters to fulfill the needs. This right based approach would require that government and the society should emerge as protectors of rights. For adopting the new rights based approach congenial atmosphere should be provided to the women so that they can claim their rights and it requires that obstacles are removed. This rights based approach should concentrate not only on the process but also the outcomes for the ultimate aim is establishment of egalitarian society. The establishment of egalitarian society requires 'active participation' of all its members. Since we have seen that men and women are hierarchically organized we have to empower women who occupy the lower position. This requires building of each individual's capacity. The necessary condition of building of 'human capital' should be provided through state intervention. Ultimately this has to be established by utilizing existing political opportunities through implementation and monitoring of gender-progressive policies. This together would transform the society for active participation of women. Redistributing power within the gender would lead to establishment of just society.

The experience of women who have remained on the fringe of political power so long and have now entered in panchayats in a critical number across caste and class has to be contextualized in the peripheral socio-political realities. The barriers of material difference in access to resources and power has to be pulled down for this state has to embark on a road to changing the structures through creation of accessibility of human and finance capital with women as the subject. Government of India's initiative through 'gender-budgeting' is a step ahead. This would entail a gender-based profile. The gender-budgeting statement presented in union Budget 2005-07 indicates in Two parts (Part A and Part B), the budget allo-

cations for programmes/schemes that are substantially meant for the benefit of women. Part A presents women specific budget provisions under the schemes in which 100% allocations are meant for women. Part B presents women-specific budget provisions under such financial schemes; allocations constitute at least 30% of the total provisions. This process is indeed a novel step but some more institutional measurements have to be taken to accommodate the multiple identities of women in the form of caste and class factor. Priory various departments entrusted with the money should have separate heads in their expenditure statement for women and in specific 'special component plan for scheduled caste' or 'tribal sub-plan'. Finances allocated under these provisions should not be spent anywhere else and department/ ministers who fail to spend the allocated amount have to return back the amount. Slowly gender-budgeting should be extended to all the departments. Those Funds sanctioned actually reach women government has to energize civil-society movement through the political space given to women. Efficient women groups should be created who should plan, implement and monitor the funds by deciding how and where the amount has to be spent Social Audits should be held regularly. The composition of these 'women group' should be according to the population of different caste residing in the community so that marginalized section of women belonging to Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribes also reap the benefits through this scheme. This plan can be successful only when state commits to the resource pool. This is a step forward in the future establishment of just society. Already a small scale experiment like this is being carried in Kerala model of decentralization where 10 percent from the budget is allocated for women's development. Efficient women groups are taking part in the process of planning, monitoring and implementing the programmes carried out under the fund allocated. The success in removing gender inequity is immense which can be gauged from the fact that Kerala's Human development Index is close to some of developed nation's indexes.