



Women Empowerment in India: Through Panchayati Raj System

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ABSTRACT

1975 was declared as the Year of women by United Nations. Since then Empowerment of women is an ongoing issue throughout the world. Empowerment is a process which gives women due recognition at par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions with human dignity. In India, the constitution have provided a platform for women in political participation and decision –making at the grassroots level through Panchayati raj system under article 40(Directive Principle of State Policy).The present study deals with empowerment of women and Panchayati raj.

KEYWORDS

women, empowerment, Panchayati raj

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute half part of the society, but they are away of political, social, economical and health opportunities. Women with disabilities have been largely neglected. Also due to many societal rules and regulations, they never be a part of the decision making process. Though at present women enjoy equal status with men as per the constitution and legal provisions but still they have a long way to go. It is true and proved that “a country prosper if its women prosper”. So women’s empowerment is vital towards the development of the society.

‘Empowerment’ means ‘to authorize’. In the context of the people, they have to be authorized to have control over their own lives. Empowerment is only effective answer to oppression, exploitation, injustice and other melodies of society. In short, Women empowerment means to give women the opportunity to fulfill their creative capabilities and desires and take decisions independently. It has social, political, economic, cultural dimensions.

The concept of empowerment started from civil rights movement in the USA, 1960. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) was held in Cairo, in 1994 and further in 1995 the ‘Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW)’ was organized in Beijing. Both conferences recognized the significance of women empowerment and reaffirmed that reproductive health is an indispensable part of women’s empowerment.

The Government of India also implemented this agenda. As a result, the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCW) made efforts to make women strong, aware, and alert about their rights, health and social development. In India sixth five year plan (1980-85) introduced, Women’s Empowerment programmes with an emphasis on ‘awareness raising’ and ‘mobilization’. There has been a major shift in the policy from the concept of “welfare of women” in the 1970s to “development of women” in the 1980s and now from 1990s “empowerment of women”. The Government of India has declared the year 2001 as year for the Empowerment of Women, but the struggle to reach this stage has been long and arduous.

Indian democracy is 68years old now. The success of democracy depends upon the people participation, both men and women. The concern for women’s political equality in India first emerged as a political issue during the national movement in which women were active participants. After 1932, Indian women have participated in the active politics. Women have held the posts of president and prime minister in India,

as well as chief ministers of various states. In the year 1993, the Government of India took a revolutionary step by making Panchayati Raj Institutions a part of the Constitution. In this regard, panchayat raj institutions which give 33% reservation to women coupled with decentralized decision making have had mixed implications.

Women in Panchayati raj system-

The Indian Constitution provided, Part 4, The Directive Principles of State Policy, Article 40 for the setting up of village panchayats. But this is non-justiciable. Political participation and grassroots democracy have been strengthened considerably by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment (1992-1993), that have created new democratic institutions for local governance. It provides reservation for women in Panchayati raj system set up two ways: (i) for the office of the members and (ii) for that of the chair person. With the advent of this Act ,India today has more than 500 district panchayats, around 5,100 block panchayats and more than 2,25,000 village panchayats, approximately 90 municipal corporations, 1,500 municipal councils, and 1,800 nagar panchayats. And there are also 6, 81, 258 women elected to Gram Panchayats:37, 109 women to Panchayat at intermediate level and 3153 women Panchayat at district level.

Role of PRI institutions in women empowerment can be highlighted by many aspects. Like:

- (i) Women are taking up the challenge and gearing themselves up to enter politics at lower level in the spirit of self governance as committed Citizens.
- (ii) Through the experience of the Indian Panchayat Raj Institutions, more than one million women have actively entered in political life of India. Reservation for women in panchayats (chairman and members) up to one-third seats.
- (iii) Women’s issues have come to the forefront at local level and consequently state and national level
- (iv) PRIs through women can work on creation, development and promotion of Self Help groups, Cooperatives, MSMEs for better employment and livelihood options in Rural areas.
- (v) Women leaders in the Panchayati Raj are transforming local governance by sensitizing the State to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.
- (vi) Through PRI, women are changing governance are evident in the issues they choose to tackle; water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence.
- (vii) Women are also taking action against child marriage and child domestic labour, whilst promoting girl-child education .Also women have used their elected authority to address

quality health care as critical issues.

If there is good side of PRI in women empowerment, there is some lackness also. It was sad but not shocking to find that even the functions and duties of Gram Sabha are not known to a large majority of respondents. About 80 percent of women are not aware of rural development schemes like NREGS, GRY and funds received under these schemes. Dependence on their husbands and other male members of family, low-level of education, lack of interest, inadequacy of training etc. appear to be the causes of women's low level of awareness. Women reservation has led only to formal and not real empowerment of women in the Panchayats. It is seen that the participation of the women shall have to get co-operation from their family members. Participation of women in preparing budget and plan is also not to the desired extent and it is dissatisfactory. It is only due to less weight age given to the women due to patriarchal and male dominated social system and age old social taboos against women in the rural area.

Suggestions:-

There are few suggestions for the better involvement of women in Panchayati Raj for the betterment of herself as well as society.

- a) Women should be given education. Education will broaden their outlook and make them aware of their rights, duties and responsibilities in the society.
- b) An important requirement for bringing about empowerment of rural 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.
- c) Women should independently join politics, so that they can have a voice in the nation building and can help the cause women in general.
- d) There should be increased emphasis on ensuring the participation of women in the meetings of Panchayats 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 the Panchayats to ensure their participation in the meetings. Attendance of all women must be made compulsory from Gram Panchayat to Zilla Parishad.
- e) The Government should provide financial support and infrastructure to women's organizations and NGOs to take up the responsibility of encouraging the women elected representatives and arranging training programmes for im-

provement of political, social and economical knowledge.

- f) Proper utilization of different government policy like National Literacy Mission and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for educating the rural men and women regarding the significance of Panchayati Raj and empowerment of women. There should be chapters on Panchayati Raj and Women Empowerment in all the classes at the school level and compulsory questions be set on these in the examination.
- g) The media, both print as well as electronic can play vital role in restructuring the rural society. It can act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice.

Conclusion

PRIs can be the first step for political empowerment of women as the confidence and understanding of polity can allow them to participate in elections to state legislatures and Parliament paving way from 'Panchayat to Parliament'. It is the only beginning of journey towards empowerment. The journey of women leadership in local governance is not so long. Women are still in learning phase. It is true that only women can effectively voice their pent up feelings, requirement and perspective in development processes. Thus preparation of women is important to voice needs and ideas of this fraction of society in development. Women in India have made much progress in the past century, they are occupying highest offices and position. At least we are ahead of America in that respect where to date there has been no women president. But there still a need for a proper solution to the many problems. The reservations at local level and Women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions are not enough for the Women Empowerment. We have a long way to go, but we will get there someday. Swami Vivekananda had said "That nation which doesn't respect women will never become great now and nor will ever in future and in pursuit of making India a great nation, let us work towards giving women their much deserved status."

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