

Role and Challenges of Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions in India

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Abstract:

Women consist of half the population of our country, so there should be nearly half of women as well in the political sector. That is why we must encourage women as India is the largest democracy in the world, and we must act like it. Women are supposed to be given their status in society, in which NGOs and universities play a massive role in it. This gives women the opportunity to have more control over the management and other women can benefit from it. As India has a population consisting of 50% women, they have to be competing equally well in the local politics to forward the gender equality agendas. Women in politics can speak up for other problems faced by other fellow women and come up with measures for the betterment of other women.

Keyword: Women, Population, PRIs, Democracy and Politics.

Introduction:

Panchayat is the backbone of many Indian villages since the beginning. Mahatma Gandhi was always in the support of Panchayat Raj and his dream came into reality with the 73rd amendment act, also known as the Panchayati Raj Act. This act provides a total of one-third of seats to the women including the reserved seats for the SC's and ST's. It also gave one-third of the total number of offices of chairperson reserved for the women. So, under the 73rd amendment act, one-third of the seat is reserved for general, scheduled, backward caste women in the village panchayat. People have to volunteer to accept this reservation made for women and respect the status of women in society which is no lesser than that of the males. New policies should be made to further our conquest to equality between males and females and participation in activities in mutual understandings.

Article Panchayat Raj one-third reservation to women Clause (3) of article 243D ensures women's participation in Panchayat Raj institution by compulsory one-third reservations of women. As of now, 20 states in India have made the reservations for women to 50% (the 20 states are Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal).

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:

Empowerment of women in all spheres and in particular the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the goals of equality, development and peace. The Indian democracy which is more than half a century old has entered the

next century. But a large mass of women are kept out of political arena still. There can be no true democracy, or no true people's participation in governance and development without equal and proportional participation of men and women at different levels of decision making. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women. A general acuity in societies around the world is that women's major role is to cook food, take care of the children and the household. Different societies have different social norms and values. In some societies both men and women are assigned specific roles and duties. In most of developing countries, only the reproductive role of women is recognized. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for women to participate in the public sphere of life. Cultural factors therefore offer constraint to women participation in politics. Institutional factors may also impact women's political participation. Electoral system with more seats per district and proportional formula for allocating seats can enhance women's participation. Quota system is another important institutional device that can guarantee a minimum number of women seats-holders in legislature. Women are changing the governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in an unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the constitution that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments or Panchayati Raj Institution System (PRI). The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in one village, or a larger area such as 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994, and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of the government. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. The percentages of women at various levels of political activity have shifted dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from 4-5 percent before to 25-40 percent after. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience in the governance of civic society. In this way they are making the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of the country, directly or through the freely chosen representatives. A proper representation of women in political affairs will ensure their views and needs reflected in public policies that affect their lives most. Political empowerment can be defined 'as the capacity to influence decision making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system'. It implies political participation which includes right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment'. It implies political participation which includes right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment'. Political empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. Political empowerment denotes a distinct role for women in the formation of policies and influencing decision-making process by integrating them into the political system. Indian women have had little representation in institutional politics since independence. There was more concern in the last two decades towards increasing women's participation in political institutions thereby leading to empowerment. Affirmative action has been accepted as a means to political empowerment. Leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance.

WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ:

Political Empowerment of women starts with the active participation of women in political institutions. The grass-root level democracy entails due importance to initial participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Even though in today's political system where some reservations have been provided to women in local bodies, that has been misused by some i.e. women have been used as rubber-stamps. Actual decision are being taken by their male family members. Women may have stormed the male bastion under the Panchayati Raj system, but in many cases it is the husbands or male members of their families calling their shots. Elected women representatives have reportedly been reduced to proxies of their male relatives. Such system of de facto rule by male counterparts have to be checked and due importance has to be given to women in PRIs. Political system and decision making process is seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution. The objective of bringing improvement in the socio-economic condition of women could be successful only by taking suitable initiatives and measures for empowering them. Empowerment of women will not be possible unless they are provided proper representation in the political system. This objective should be achieved at desired level through making the provision of linking and associating maximum number of women in political affairs even at the lowest level of political activity. In recently introduced Panchayati Raj Institutions, the policy for reservation in favour of women has therefore, been thought as an important approach to maximize their participation in the local level.

POLITICAL SYSTEM AND DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN THE ACTIVITIES OF RURAL AREA:

Under the 73rd amendment of constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution, one third of the total seats for scheduled caste, backward class, scheduled tribes and general caste women members in Grampradhan of village Panchayat, Block Panchayat, District Panchayat are reserved for women candidate. Conceptually, providing representation to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions could be accepted as an important planning approach regarding minimizing the traditional felling of people about the status of women in our society, particularly in terms of keeping women under the subjugation of men, imposing restrictions by the households and society against them in the availing of certain opportunities and several other social, cultural and traditional bindings disavouring them for improving personal life style and status in existing social and economic setting. Consequently this newly introduced policy would enhance the possibilities of increasing equalities in the process of socio-economic development, participation in different activities in mutual understandings, status and role to play in the house hold and the activities performed outside households and different decision making processes of the family among men and women. Factors such as the attitude and intention of elected women towards the initiation of various development programmes and capacity in making efforts in linking different segments of village population with the introduced programmes also matter very much in improving the status of women representatives in the social environment of the village Panchayats. As a consequence this process would lead to increase and strength of empowerment of women.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTION:

Participation in election: The Act provides for the reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women. It is an attempt to ensure greater participation of women in the election process directly and indirectly. It would be the nursery of creating women politicians for national

politics. Even the participation of common women citizens in various activities such as attending Gram Sabha meetings, etc. has reportedly increased (68-78 percent).

Participation in rural development: Women are actively participating in rural development as per their capacity right from labourers to policy- makers.

Participation in decision-making: The participation of women as elected as well as non-elected members are rising due to reservation for women. It acts as a pull factor for women to participate in meetings. They give their suggestions for various works and problems faced by them.

Agent of social revolution: Women are acting as an agent of change in the society and raising voice against injustice and atrocities.

Reducing corruption and violence: Due to women representatives, the nexus of officers and male elected representatives are breaking, which has a direct impact on reducing corruption. The role of local muscle power has substantially reduced due to active participation and awareness of women about their rights and power.

Reduction in violence against women: Domestic violence has substantially declined due to women Pradhan or sarpanch. These women representatives pro-actively take up such violence. The victims also feel free to share their grievances to women representatives.

Reduction in violence against Dalits: The dominance of upper caste patriarchy has substantially declined, hence the shackles of casteism are subsiding.

Practicing participatory democracy: Growing participation of marginalized sections in general and women in particular, is transforming our democratic setup from representative democracy to participatory democracy.

DIFFICULTIES FACED BY WOMEN TO REPRESENT IN PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS ARE:

- Political intervention present in the panchayats
- Women are made to act as proxies for men
- Husband takes the intervention of the elected women and operates on her behalf
- Women in rural areas lack the awareness of the political; rights they possess
- All the negative public opinions
- Lack of education of women in the rural areas
- Lack of training courses for the women
- Violence against women to suppress them from acting their rights

CHALLENGES BEFORE WOMEN IN PRIS:

Patriarchy: Many women are not allowed to contest elections and many continue to work as proxies for their male family members. Their male co-workers show insensitivity and may refuse to cooperate. Burden of household responsibilities, purdah (veil) system and domestic violence negatively affect their functioning.

Inadequate Capacities: Majority of women representatives enter into public life for the first time and do not have enough knowledge and skills to handle affairs of panchayats. Training programmes conducted by government training agencies are unable to cover all elected representatives in time.

Violent Opposition: Women often face more resistance from the community if they want to take bold steps. They are also subjected to violence from powerful elements of the society.

Two Child Norm: A few States like Odisha and Rajasthan have the two child norm for contesting panchayat elections. In rural areas women hardly have any say in the number of children in the family and such laws restrict their entry into panchayats.

Caste System: Hierarchical caste system in rural India makes it difficult for women from SC and ST communities to work independently and effectively.

Lack of Women at Other Levels: Lack of women co-workers and at higher administrative levels also hinders the free functioning of women representatives.

Dual responsibility: Women traditionally burdened with domestic workers face difficulties in balancing the official work with their home.

Lack of security: Well, sometimes due to lack of security women members fail to visit remote areas in odd hours or attend meetings in faraway places. The gradual criminalization of politics also is arresting their participation.

Lack of expertise: Lack of adequate information and managerial experience among newly elected women representatives is challenging, as they struggle to understand what is expected of them as elected members, leading to a situation where male representatives often seize power.

Communication Issues: The communication problem hinders performance as most of the correspondences, rules and also the regulations are in English.

Leadership skills: The lack of leadership skills makes it difficult for them to assert or even openly express their opinions. Recently, it has been reported that 77% of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions believe they can't change things easily on the ground.

Sarpanch Pati System: Even after getting elected most of their work in panchayats is done by their husbands.

INITIATIVES FOR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PRIS:

Following initiatives and training programmes have to be adopted to improve the participation and decision making power of women even at the grass root level of governance and enhance their number in the PRIs

1. Measures have to be adopted to enhance the participation of women in governance in higher numbers.
2. The elected leaders of these institutions need to be at least literate, so that they could guide and tell the villagers about the various provisions of the PR-Act.
3. Literacy plays an important role in educating rural women and helps to detail about system of governance. Hence, steps to improve female literacy particularly in rural areas is the need of the hour.
4. Need to develop women's leadership and communication skills for enhancing social mobilization.
5. Essentially, to train them, find ways and means to interface with other layers of local self-governance within the state and claim the Panchayat's entitlements.
6. Familiarize them with the rural/women/child development programmes of state and central governments.
7. There should not be any factions and party politics in terms of planning i.e. selection and location of schemes rather genuine implementation of the projects are necessary for strengthening the decentralized planning.

8. To empower them to identify and break cultural barriers and improve their socio-economic condition.
9. Systematic awareness is needed for enhancing rural women's capacity to take up their new responsibilities as local legislators.
10. Steps have been taken to enhance the participation of women in higher numbers.
11. Literacy is a very major part to educate women about governance and increasing the higher participation of women in these sectors.
12. To develop women's leadership and communication skills for enhancing travelling.
13. Train them to speak up and find means to interface with the local self-governance to claim panchayat entitlements.
14. To educate women on the facilities and programs of the state and central government have done for them.
15. To empower and motivate them to achieve big things by breaking all cultural barriers.
16. All the elected leaders should have a minimum of literacy to carry out guidelines and to educate the villagers about the PR-Act.

CONCLUSION:

After the establishment of the Panchayat Raj institution, women have been getting better opportunities and also living up to the responsibilities given to them. This act has been a great opportunity for women to come out and participate in the administration in the field of politics. It gives them a platform to raise their voices and be heard. PRIs in our country a woman gets an opportunity to prove her worth as a good administrator, decision-maker or a good leader. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a milestone in this regard. It provides women a chance to come forward. This experiment is proving to be a big success particularly by providing opportunity to women to come out of their houses and participate in administrative and political field. It has to be considered that the inclusion of well qualified women in village Panchayati at the initial state of the interlocation of Panchayati Raj Institution in rural areas would be an important instrumental measure in planning for improving social status and empowering women. Women constitute half of the population of our country. It is our duty to encourage the women in such a largest democracy of the world. To give a proper status to the women, Government, NGOs, and Universities have to play a vital role in this field. This group of women, if provided representation at village Panchayati level can strongly rise and handle the issues related to the betterment of women, can play dominant role in decision making process and make suitable recommendation for improving the status of women in the meeting. It creates opportunities for women to exercise more control over design and provisions of services and the management of resources it may benefit. Good number of women competing with the men in local politics, forwarding gender related agendas is looked as a way towards the gender equity.

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