

Women empowerment their participation and challenges in Panchayati raj institutions

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Abstract

Women empowerment includes the lives of women at multiple levels, family, community, market, & the state. The question surrounding women's empowerment, the condition and position of women have now become critical to the human rights based approaches to development. Empowering the women in social, political, economical and legal aspects is necessary to convert the idle society into self-sustainable society. It involves the building up of a society wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. One major therapy prescribed by woman empowerment advocates is empowering women through legislation for ensuring participation in political decision making.

Panchayat Raj and decentralization witnessed tremendous popularity both in the 20th century as well as in the second decade of 21st century. Democratic decentralization is a highly concerned concept for development. Decentralization promotes local level representation, solves local issues and enhances decision making powers of the rural people. Effective decentralization provides greater choice to the people to participate in decision making and this could act as a mechanism in the development process.

This paper is attempts to look into the dynamism of the process whereby women empowerment is achieved through legislation or women participation in the Panchayat Raj Institutions.

Keywords: women empowerment, self-sustainable society, exploitation, panchayati raj, decentralization, community

1. Introduction

Concept of Women empowerment

The concept of women's empowerment emerged from debates generated by the women's movement during the 1980s when feminists, particularly from third world countries, evinced dissatisfaction with the prevailing development discourse that was largely political and economist in its orientation. The mid 1980s therefore saw the emergence and spread of 'women's empowerment' as a more political and transformatory concept that challenged not only patriarchy but also the mediating structures of class, race, ethnicity and in the case of India, caste and religion. Feminists, particularly those from Latin American and South Asian countries, evolved their own approach, emphasizing the importance of consciousness raising, leading to organizing and building a movement for women's equality.

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence.

Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure.

The term 'women empowerment' has come to occupy an important position globally over the years. Educational attainment and economic participation are the key constituents in ensuring empowerment of women. The economic empowerment of women is a vital element of strong economic

growth in any country. The extent of empowerment of women in the national hierarchy is determined largely by the three factors – her economic, social and political identity and their weightage. These factors are deeply interlinked which imply that if efforts in even one dimension remain absent or weak, outcomes and momentum generated by the other components cannot be sustained. It is only when all the three factors are simultaneously addressed and made compatible with each other can the woman being truly empowered. Therefore for holistic empowerment of the woman to happen - social, economic and political aspects impacting a woman's life must converge effectively. Women as an independent group constitute 49% of the country's total population as per the 2011 Census. The importance of women as an important human resource was recognized by the Constitution of India which not only accorded equality to women but also empowered the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in their favors. A number of Articles of the Constitution specially reiterated the commitment of the constitution towards the socio economic development of women and upholding their political right and participation in decision making.

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women 2001 has as its goal bringing about advancement, development and empowerment of women in all spheres of life through creation of a more responsive judicial and legal system sensitive to women and mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process. Over the years there have been efforts made to socially, economically and politically empower women but as a result of the lack of synergy or coordination

between these activities, the outcomes could never be completely satisfactory. Women's lack of economic empowerment impedes growth and poverty reduction, but also has a host of other negative impacts. Thus, it is extremely important to ensure that women are economically empowered. There are various factors that contribute to the economic empowerment of women.

The best way of empowerment is perhaps through inducting women in the mainstream of development. Women empowerment will be real and effective only when they are endowed income and property so that they may stand on their feet and build up their identity in the society. Development warrants the eradication of the feeling of dominance and dependence of whosoever is associated with inferior economic status. Development improves quality of life through the process of expansion, ensures freedom from hunger, exploitation, discrimination and oppression and also infuses a sense of self belief and provides the strength to stand up against violence. Economic independence is the basic premise behind empowerment through development. While women's participation in the development process provides them employment opportunity and the opportunity to get out of the clutches of poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy etc, economic independence imbibes confidence and the strength to stand up and think about their future. Employment generating schemes in rural areas providing preferential treatment to poor women workers may prove to be a good move in this direction, but it needs a definite preconceived development strategy and pattern. Growth itself does not guarantee gender equality and women empowerment. The present mode of production based on the market system has no inbuilt system of minimizing gender disparity; rather it thrives on opportunities created by gender relations for power and profit. (Cornell, R.W.—Gender and Power, 1987) Development strategy for empowerment will mainly be concerned with employment and asset generation coupled with skill oriented education and vocational training. A preconceived development strategy studded with emphasis on employment, education, health, nutrition, sanitation etc, critical elements that contribute to the quality of human life, more so in the rural sector, may prove to be effective in the long run to raise the status of women but in men dominated societies with social and political institutions biased in favour of gender discrimination, may not prove to be effective enough to take them out of the downward gravitational pull. Economic empowerment can be a handy tool in as much as enabling a woman to lead a graceful existence in her family and society but may not prove too potent a weapon in the larger more grim battle against social, political and even economic oppression, which warrants collective strength. In a democratic setup collective strength emanates from political participation.

2. Concept of Panchayat Raj Institutions

Panchayati Raj and decentralization witnessed tremendous popularity both in the 20th century as well as in the second decade of 21st century. Democratic decentralization is a highly concerned concept for development. Decentralization promotes local level representation, solves local issues and enhances decision making powers of the rural people. Effective decentralization provides greater choice to the

people to participate in decision making and this could act as a mechanism in the development process. It also improves efficiency in service delivery and enhances accountability.

However, effective decentralization itself requires effective participation of people and most of the so called decentralized systems do not fulfill this essential condition. Government of India initiated the Concept of PRIs after getting independence and the 73rd and 74th amendments have provided a new path for these institutions and promoted local representation.

There is a sad paucity of political representation of women in PRIs in the state. Though women and Sc, ST reservation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions was introduced in 2004, its impact could not be seen in the 2011 PRIs election. It is to be noted that in other states of the country, women reservation in the PRIs has been increased to 50 percent, whereas, Jammu and Kashmir still continues with its old 33 percent reservation scheme. This has resulted in inadequate representation of women in the society. An important factor for partial failure of the scheme is the absence of direct election for positions of office bearers in Block Development Councils. Direct election would have proved more fruitful and beneficial

3. Review of Literature

For sustainable economic and social development to take place in any country, it is necessary that people participate in the political process. Panchayati Raj is not a new phenomenon in India. Its illustration in history goes back to more than 1000 years. The British almost destroyed these ancient republics, as well as the involvement of women in politics. From 2 October 1959 when the first Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) was inaugurated in 24 April, 1993 when the 73rd Amendment Act came into force, it has been an uncertain and undulating journey for Panchayats (Sahni, S. and Kaul, S., 2009) [2].

The Constitution of India is based on the principles of equality. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth. It envisages political equality for men and women but no concrete step was taken by the government before 1993. The committee on the Status of women in India (1974) observed that the rights guaranteed by the Constitution have helped to build an illusion of equality and power which is frequently used as an argument to resist protective and accelerative measures to enable women to achieve their just and equal position in the society. It was only in 1994 that the government of India acknowledging the recommendations of the committee for the status of women report (1974), noting the low participation of women in politics, eyeing the effective implementation of developmental and poverty alleviation schemes from the grassroots level and also drawing inspiration from the experience of Karnataka (which provided reservation for women in the three tier Panchayati Raj system in 1983) brought 73rd Constitutional Amendment act in the year 1999 introducing not less than 33 per cent reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj institutions in rural areas. Undoubtedly it is a landmark legislative step in the direction of empowerment of women. With the passing of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Indian federal system has become a three tier federal structure: the union government at the apex and local self-governments — Nagar Nigam (urban) and Panchayats (rural) at the lowest strata with the States crucially placed at the middle. It is

acknowledged that the local self-government is an effective method of governing as well as designing and implementing the developmental schemes at the grassroots level. We are here concerned with local self-government in the rural areas popularly known as Panchayati Raj Institutions and these effectively come under the control of state governments. In the rural areas to a three tier structure has been adopted

1. Gram Panchayat consisting of a village or a group of villages having a population of not less than 5000 and not more than 7000 or the geographical distance of an area within a radius of five kilometers from the centre.
2. Block (Taluk) Panchayat for every block.
3. Jila Panchayat for every District.

With the 73rd Amendment the reservation system has been put into practice. It provides for one third of total Constituencies to be reserved for women. Because of the adoption of the policy of rotation, reserved constituency differ each election implies that a constituency which is a reserve constituency this year may very well be a general constituency in the next term. The elected representatives continue to hold office for a period of five years.

With the introduction of reservation or quota system in the Panchayati Raj Institutions a great beginning has been made in the direction of legislative empowerment of women and it is hoped that along with women's empowerment through collective voicing and participation in the development stream, it should go a long way in the real empowerment of women. But the critical question is as to how far this step has been really effective in involving women in the decision making process and raising the issues related with women community and getting them integrated with the mainstream of decision making? Has it really worked in solving the basic issues and problems faced by women in the society?

4. Objective of study

- To study the participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institution is one of the major factors that have contributed to the low status of women in the rural areas.
- To study the participation of women has been successful in integrating the issues concerned with the women community in the mainstream of decision making.
- To identify the causes and obstacles those infringe the participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- To identify the legislative measures and developmental measures in raising the status of women.
- To examine the participation of women in the political system.

5. Research methodology

This study is descriptive in nature. We have use secondary data for the purpose of this project. The main sources of secondary data are annual general reports, journals, magazines, newspapers and concerned websites.

In a country like India, where social orientation is based on class, caste and gender, the picture of deprivation and inequality is appalling. The women are not considered as a social group. They are either included with men or totally ignored. In post-independent India, the Sarada Act provided an impetus to the battle for the rights of Women. The passing of the Hindu Code Bill, 1955 and the provision of equal rights

for women in the Constitution of India improved the status of the women. In June 1954, the first post-war all-India organization of Women, the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) was formed in view of impending socio-political issues. Later, the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act (1992) created space for women in political participation and decision-making at the grass root level by providing that 1/3rd of the seats would be reserved for women all over the country. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA), 1992 says- "It provides reservations for women in PRIs set up in two ways; for the office of the members and for that of the chairpersons". As per the clause (2) and (3) of article 243(d), not less than one third of the seats meant for direct election of members at each tier of the Panchayats are to be reserved for the women.

6. Women participation in Panchayati Raj System

According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj's mid-term appraisal of the 'State of the Panchayats 2006-07', "No less than 10 lakh women are in our Panchayati Raj institutions, comprising 37 percent of all those elected and rising to as high as 54 per cent in Bihar, which has 50 percent reservation for women". Increased political accountability to women comes out only from increasing their numbers amongst decision-makers, although this is necessary and important. It must also be linked to improved democratic governance overall, understood as inclusive, responsive and accountable management of public affairs. The benchmark generally selected for evaluating women's participation in politics is their representation in term of numbers or percentages. This does not facilitate adequate understanding, because representation does not, in itself, constitute evidence of participation. Thus, several indicators have been identified for determining the status and quality of women participation in the local political process.

6.1 Participation in the Gram Sabha

Participation has been taken as a vital index for the women members to assess their empowerment in Panchayati Raj Institutions. According to the 73rd Amendment (Part IX), a Gram Sabha may exercise powers and perform functions at the village level as provided by laws enacted by its state legislature. A large proportion of female is organizing and attending the gram sabha meetings. A study conducted during 2008-2009 by Ministry of Panchayati Raj showed that a sizeable 93 percent of male Pradhans reported performing their primary role of organizing and attending the Gram Sabha meetings. However, smaller in numbers than male Pradhans, a significantly large proportion of female Pradhans (86 percent) also reported executing this important role of being a local Panchayati Raj functionary.

6.2 Encouraging Community Participation in Gram Sabha

Elected representatives are expected to create an enabling environment for the local community, and especially women, to participate in Gram Sabha meetings, raise questions, interact and present their opinions. In a study, conducted by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, showed the attendance in Gram Sabha meetings, which is an important indicator of the quality of women representatives' participation. The study

showed a low participation of women citizens in Gram Sabha meetings, suggesting low levels of mobilization by elected women representatives. About 63 percent of elected representatives themselves indicated that less than 25 percent of women participate in the Gram Sabha meetings. This participation was particularly low in Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Goa, but high in Kerala, West Bengal, Karnataka, Assam and Tripura. The latter category of states has higher levels of political mobilization.

6.3 Interaction with Government Officials

According to the statistics and data (Ministry of Panchayati Raj) the womenfolk participate in the gram sabha meetings; however, there persists hesitation when it comes to interaction with the officials about their problems or developmental works. Sometimes gender disparity becomes a hindrance towards putting forward their view point. The all-India figure shows that more than half the total Pradhans maintained good relations with the local police. By contrast, only 31 percent of Ward Members reported interaction with the local police. Among the elected women representatives, nearly 32 percent reported regular interaction with the police, in comparison to 45 percent of the men (study conducted by Ministry of Panchayati Raj).

6.4 Participation in Community Mobilization

Effective participation is not adequately reflected in statistics on meeting attendance, but may also be tested by evaluating the elected representatives in terms of their articulation, openness to discussions, adopting issues and generally solving problems of the community. They are more effective when they succeed in mobilizing the community about various developmental issues and thus, create awareness among the people. A study on the all-India level on community mobilization on health-related issues showed that the total of 43 percent of women representatives and about 47 percent of men reported taking part in health-related campaigns.

7. Challenges Involved

There is non-cooperation of the male members that they primarily face on the basis of gender discrimination. Often, the men of the village do not accord them the respect and regard that is their due. Officials take advantage of their inexperience and poor education. Effective devolution is so uneven and inadequate that oftentimes, even the most able women are crippled for want of the rightful allocation of functions, finances and functionaries without which effective Panchayati Raj is rendered impossible. Elected women members are sometimes used as dolls behind their husbands or men in the family. In many parts of India, especially in northern states the husband performs the duties of the women pradhans and gram sabha members in lieu of the women themselves.

8. Conclusion

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act in India focused on political structures and processes of rural India and vulnerable populations. Earlier, participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions was questioned in terms of the substance and effectiveness of representation. Local committees

insufficiently represented women. Women were rarely heads of Panchayats and needed the lower positions to advance within the system. Thus, the act has been passed to assure women's representation in Indian Panchayati Raj System. However, women members of Panchayats needed to be educated and informed about politics: their rights, the nature of Indian democracy, policies and programmes for women and the underprivileged and voting rights. Women's centre and other organizations can serve as catalysts to mobilize women and help solve political dilemmas.

There are several challenges still that the women are facing in the local governance system. Rural women were particularly vulnerable as a group because of strong traditional values maintained in rural areas, patriarchal families, lack of women's education and access to information, poor exposure to the "outside" world and lack of power. A combination of constitutional provisions, government policies, social action and self-awareness among rural women will eventually result in Indian women becoming part of the mainstream political power sharing and decision-making.

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