



WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF PANCHAYATIRAJ INSTITUTIONS IN EMPOWERING WOMEN

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Abstract

Women constitute an integral part of our social economic life and actively participate in socio economic development of the nation. Political participation of women in India has been neglected even since independence. Due to various constraints they could not occupy the positions of power and assume leadership roles. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has given a new dimension to the process of women's empowerment and many women entered into politics as beginners. Panchayatiraj institutions came forward to empower women in the society. It has created a space for women in political participation. It clearly legitimizes and asserts the role of women as partners in the public field. This will encourage more women to take up political life as their carrier and shape their priorities accordingly. Women's entry in politics has brought about qualitative change in her life.

Keywords: Panchayatiraj, Empowerment, Political Participation.

Introduction

Women need to be empowered in the realm of political decision making so as to facilitate their 'real' empowerment. Due to 73rd Amendment over a million women have come out of their homes for the first time to hold public office and to participate in public activities, making their presence in the power struggles once dominated by men. This has been the most effective formal step towards political empowerment of women. There are many instances where women have been self-motivated to fight an election. The self-help movement has also had a far-reaching impact on the empowerment of women and several of them who have gained confidence, economic visibility and the strength of numbers through SHGs have stepped into the Panchayats. The empowerment of women is becoming an increasingly popular term in human rights and developmental discourses. Women play significant role in all walks of life. Empowerment of women is a necessary basic condition for socioeconomic development of any society.

In India roots of Panchayati Raj are very deep. Panchayati Raj Institutions in India are the prime instruments of decentralization at the grass root level. One of the important principles of democracy is that one should not feel powerless or feel that he cannot do much to change his situation. But he should feel that he is able to influence events and process surrounding him. There are a huge number of Panchayats working in different circumstances, the extent of empowerment of women vary from region to region and Panchayats work under different legal frameworks – as States have the discretion to define the scope and ambit of Panchayati Raj – every spectrum of political behaviour, ranging from abject subordination of women to remarkable instances of social and political assertiveness can be seen in the functioning of Panchayats. Women's development is directly related to national development. In the sixth five year plan a special chapter has been added 'Women Development'. In this it has been mentioned that the strategy should be three fold i.e. education, employment and health. They are inter-dependent and dependent on the total development process.

Panchayati Raj Institutions in India

With Independent India was born the quest for a stable democratic government which ensured liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and opportunity, fraternity as well as the right to participate in political decision making. Apparently, this thirst for freedom in every form has its roots in ancient Indian Institutions. Although Panchayati Raj Institutions were formally conceived by the Constitution of India as bedrock of self-governance but it is not a new concept in India; in fact the history of 6 Panchayati Raj Institutions in India can be traced from approximately 1000 years. Its genesis can be seen from the time when the villages were little republics governed by their Panchayats. Literatures indicate that in India, there existed a well-established system of local self-government which was run on a set pattern of age-old traditions and customs. Though the present Panchayat system has no direct connection with the system of rural local self-government which existed in ancient and medieval times, much of its inspiration and faith people have in it today, are derived from the Panchayat system in the past.

The Panchayati Raj Institution is a system of local government, a mechanism of rural development and also an agency of state government for specific activities with each of these dimensions not merely supplementing the other but also as a part of integrated system maintaining and strengthening the integrity of the whole. The Indian system of local self-government comprises primarily of two sub systems-rural local bodies (Panchayati Raj) and urban local bodies-(municipal corporations,



municipalities, town area committees and cantonment boards). Both these sub systems are run by the popularly elected representatives of the inhabitants of the villages, towns and districts respectively. The rural people are governed by Panchayati Raj Institutions. It is a three tier organic structure, comprising of gram panchayat at the village level, PanchayatSamiti at the block (taluka) level and Zillaparishad at the district (zilla) level.

Concept of Women Empowerment

Empowerment is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept. According to the Country Report the Government of India Empowerment means moving from position of enforced powerlessness to one of power. Economic Empowerment is the key to open up avenues of such power by enabling women to gain personal identity and social status. It involves reaching women all basic amenities and services through broad based efforts, addressing their problems arising out of gender bias and social constraints that confront Indian women and help achieve linkage between women and available economic/social services and provide them with economic opportunities.

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept and relates to the social attainment, economical participation and political participation. Further, Empowerment of Women through Panchayati Raj Institutions. Empowerment is an ongoing process and cannot be achieved in an absolute sense. It is a relative concept and varies according to the specific situations. So, it has always been very challenging in defining or measuring empowerment. It has been defined by various authors from different perspectives. Amartya Sen defined empowerment as the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources (physical, human, intellectual and financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). They also elaborated that it leads to a growing intrinsic capability, greater self-confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barrier.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has given a new dimension to the process of women's empowerment in India. Apart from one-third reservation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the act has given constitutional powers and responsibilities for a range of issues including resource management, family planning, education and health. With the participation of women in PRIs, interpersonal relations within their families have changed for the better and this political process has heightened women's perceptions of their own capabilities. Even much-marginalized women have taken participation further to become activists despite constraints like illiteracy, lack of experience, family responsibilities, restrictive social norms, lack of enabling environment and violence.

The Amendment Bill, providing a constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj institutions, was passed by both Houses of Parliament in December 1992. Following its ratification by more than half the state Assemblies as required under the Constitution, the President of India gave his assent, and the same came into force as the Constitutional (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 on April 24, 1993, adding a new part to the Constitution, namely, Part IX titled "The Panchayats".

Apart from adding a new section – Part IX – to the constitution, it also added the Eleventh Schedule, which lists the subjects on which powers may be devolved to the Panchayats. The Act required that the states pass conformity legislations within a specified time, and while it made some provisions that were mandatory and binding on the states, there were other enabling or discretionary provisions on which the states were – within broadly defined parameters – expected to legislate. Let us briefly examine the provisions of empowering rural women through this amendment; and its opportunities and outcomes.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Empowerment of Rural Women

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has served as the institutional breakthrough towards ensuring equal access to and enhanced participation of rural women in the inclusive development through the participation of women in the local government at grassroot level. It is, here, attempted to highlight dynamics of the opportunities envisioned and outcomes realized; and the challenging realities encountered in the exercise of empowerment of rural women.

Provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment

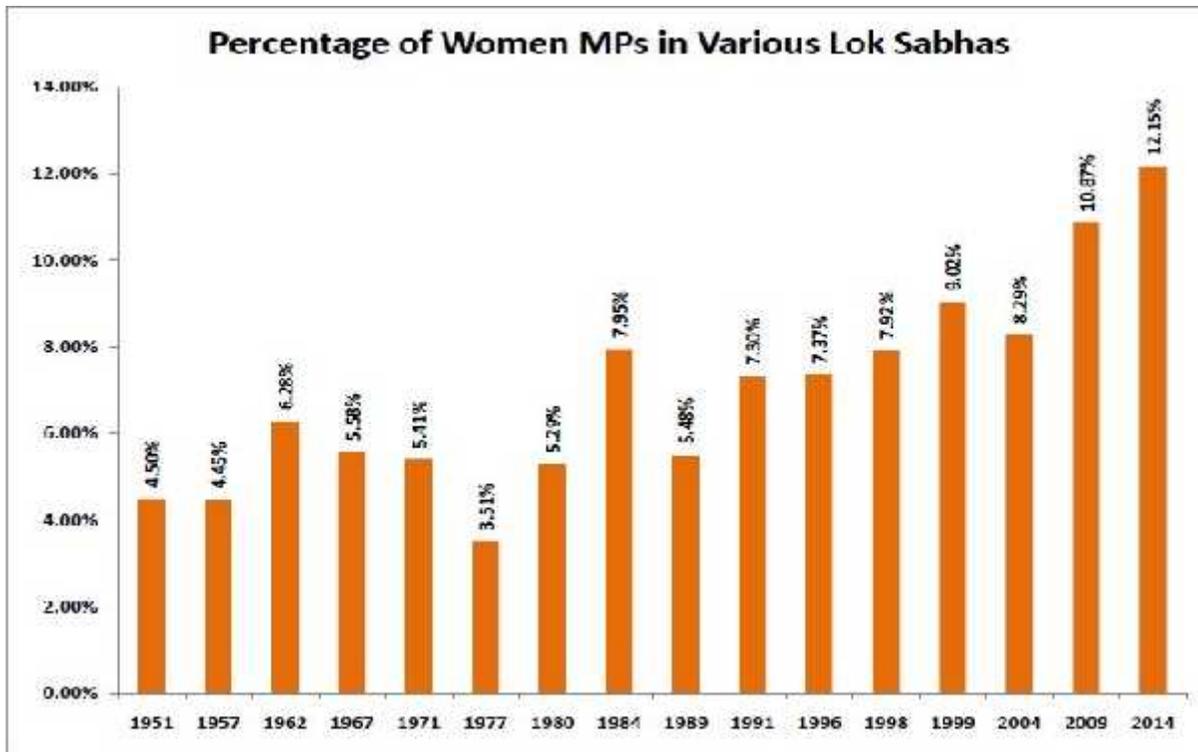
1. Not less than of the one third of the total number of seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes or as the case may be, Scheduled Tribes.
2. Not less than one third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total seats to be filled by the direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for the women and allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.
3. The Act also provides for reservation of one third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats at all levels for women including women from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

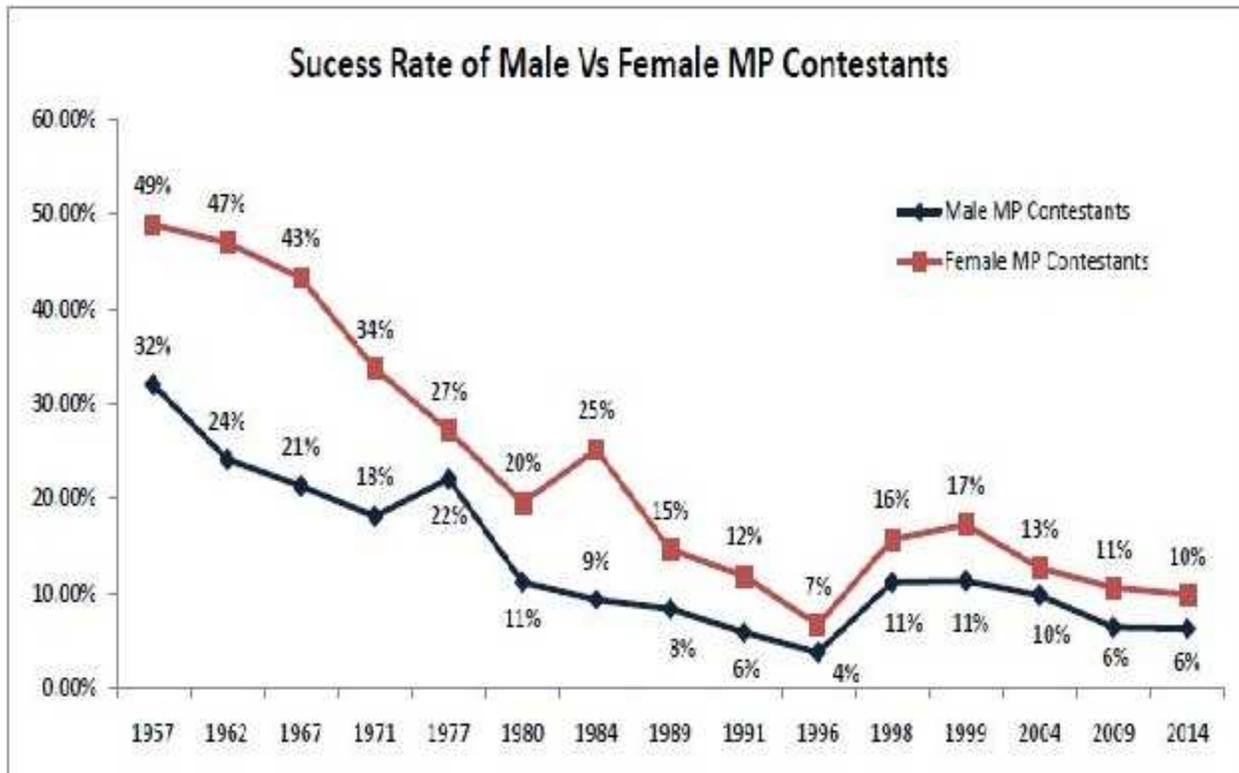
4. This provision of one-third reservation for women is indeed a historic step, as it guaranteed representation and participation for women as group in Panchayats.

Performance of women in PRIs

Despite several stumbling blocks women PRI members have generally performed well throughout the country. Several surveys indicate this. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj of the Government of India has also conducted one, with by far the largest sample size. Culling the observations from all the sources certain common points emerge-

Participation of women in the Gram Sabha meetings increases when the Pradhan is a woman. This corroborates the general perception that political communication improves when the citizen and the leader are of the same sex. Since women panchayat representatives consistently demand for adequate supply of drinking water, housing and social welfare programs, and expenditure on these counts are relatively higher in women headed panchayats. Women headed panchayats score brownie points in construction of roads, upkeep of drinking water facilities and administering government loan schemes. However their performance is not as effective in ensuring irrigation avenues. Women headed panchayats generally take more interests in negotiating social evils like child marriage, indiscriminate sale of liquor, witch-hunting and such other problems.





Problems to Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

Despite reservation for women, effective participation in PRIs has failed due to misuse and manipulator by the local power-brokers. Ignorance of women about their rights and pro endures and about their potential and responsibilities has kept them far behind me in the local bodies. It is very much doubtful that mere increase in the number of reserved seats for women in local bodies is likely to increase the participation of women. Unless structural changes are brought about, a -.- sincere effort is mac e to educate women and the power structures existing in rural areas are neutralized, •thing much can be achieved. Women representatives often run into barriers (especially of family and society) and are hindered from participating effectively. They feel inhibited to speak especially when they are in large male dominated assemblies. Those who muster up enough courage and strength to speak receive very little respect or attention. It has been observed that women are invited only to complete the quorum. Further, the officials also pay heed to the needs of upper class women in preference to the needs of peasant women. The rights of women thus get systematically nullified by the local bureaucracy. Some of the main problems are

1. Illiteracy and low education levels of the majority of the women elected to the PR's.
2. Overburdened with family responsibilities.
3. Introversion due to the lack of communication skills.
4. Poor socio-economic background with which the women have come into the system and poor capacity building.
5. Male family members and also leaders from the caste group/community come in the way of the affairs of the Panchayats.
6. Indifferent attitude and behavior of officials working in the system.
7. Misguidance by the local bureaucracy.
8. Apprehension of no-confidence motion by the other elected members of the system.
9. Mounting pressure from the political party which has vested interests in the gender reservation for positions in the PRI system.
10. Women were branded as 'incompetent' in the eyes of villagers and were forced to quit through passing of no confidence motions.
11. Undue interference by the husband of women representatives, treating them as mere dummies.
12. Widespread use of corrupt practices among the male members and local bureaucrats.



It is clear that mere reservation is not enough because a woman representative lacks qualitative participation due to both internal and external factors. Woman's empowerment is not something, which can be handed over to women only. This is a process, which involves sincerity, earnestness and capacity and capability on the part of both men and women. It is a challenging task in village India as even today she cannot take any independent decision. She feels subordinate to her husband and even to her son.

Suggestions to Increase the Participation of Women's in PRIs

There is a need to empower rural women to enhance their quality of participation. The awakening of women in India towards a society where justice and brotherhood prevail can best be achieved by woman-to-woman contact. The cultural patterns of Indian society are such that social progress among women can be promoted effectively through the medium of personal relationship among them. It is women who can inspire confidence and offer stimulus for social change especially among their sisters in the rural areas. Hence, effective leadership among women must come from the ranks of women themselves. Their qualitative participation can be achieved through training besides of course of the literacy educational programmes.

Mahila Mandals could be activated for this purpose where women could learn skills and acquire confidence. Links have to be strengthened between the village and the bureaucracy at the lower level. Special programmes on the role of women in PRIs, on rights of women and procedures should be prepared and highlighted through the mass media so as to make women aware and improve the quality of their participation in the socio-political system. The government (Ministry of Women and Child Development) should take the responsibility to make the rural women aware about their rights and responsibilities. There should be a remedy for each problem of rural women participation. It should be followed by comprehensive empowerment policies and programs. Some problems and their remedies are as follows

1. It is seen that most of the time the political parties intervene in the functioning of Panchayats. They even intervene in the election process directly. It creates uncomfot for the women contestants and women representatives. The government should take a strict action in such an intervention of political parties and elections should be conducted fairly.
2. Most women are elected because of the status of their husbands, fathers or sons and that such women often act as proxies for men's view at the councils being advised by their men relatives. It shows that women representatives are unable to perform their duties. We should change our negative mentality and government should also organize camps to restrict male members from intervening in their independent functioning.
3. It has been mostly found that the husband of an elected woman representative always intervenes in her day-to-day functioning. The intervention is not only in small matters but he also intervenes in her decision-making matters which is a big drawback in the women's participation.
4. In rural areas political awareness among the women is negligible. It is the duty of the state government and local administration to educate the women about the political issues and create awareness among them. The government should organize awareness camps in rural areas with the help of local administration from time-to-time.
5. The feudal thinking in our society is a big problem for our society as well as in the path of women representatives of the PRIs. Most of the people of our society have a negative opinion about the women's leadership capacity. But it is wrong. Here is a question of our mentality.
6. Special training and refresher courses for women representatives should be conducted from time-to-time. It gives them confidence and creates political awareness and power.
7. Government should make special provisions for the women representatives and give them more powers as compared to male.

Conclusion

Reservation of seats for women under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has, undoubtedly, provided rural women with an opportunity of formal involvement in the development and political processes at the grassroots level thereby enabling them to influence the decision making process in the local governments. Reservation guaranteed representation to women as group and provided an opportunity to express their opinions or voice their grievances on social and economic problems in a formal forum, thus bringing to the fore the potential feminine thought and action in the development of people. It has enabled them to emerge as effective leaders and also to act as catalytic agents by inspiring confidence and providing stimulus for social change among rural women.



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Domain areas

1. Political empowerment.
2. Economic Empowerment of Women.
3. Social Empowerment And Education.
4. Health & Nutrition.
5. Gender Rights, Gender Based Violence and Law Enforcement.
6. Gender Budgeting, Gender Mainstreaming & Gender Audit.
7. Empowerment of Vulnerable and Marginalized Groups and Women in Difficult Circumstances.

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