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## A study on the role of Panchayat Raj Institutions in Women Empowerment

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### Abstract:

People in every society have been subjected to social exploitation and oppression perhaps because of conventions and practices prevalent in that society. There is a limit to tolerate this kind of social exploitation. Overtime if an individual or a group or an organization gains the ability to fight exploitation and oppression and to become free from exploitation, such ability is regarded as social empowerment. An individual may try to acquire development status by getting liberated from caste based, sex based, status based and such other societal conventional exploitation. All these kinds of empowerment namely, economic, political and social combined together may be viewed as total empowerment. Women's contribution to economic development is immense both in visible and invisible form. From being primarily a vehicle of human reproduction, to a vehicle of social, cultural and economic good, she can create wonders. Women constitute almost 50% of the India's population, their number was 586.5 million as per 2011 census report. To be more precise, women represent 48.5 % of India's population. Despite this, the fact is that they have been most abused and have undergone with various types of hardships in their day to day life. Women or community require representation in government bodies with a view to safeguarding and protecting the interest of members of the group or community. Representation is extended to people through the mechanism of election. Representation in a democratic set up is seen as synonymous to empowerment. All the democratic governments in the world have recognized the importance of peoples' participation for the success of democracy. As a result, appropriate provisions have been made in their constitutions to provide the right to representation in all the levels of governance. This belief culminated in the creation of the concept of modern welfare state wherein the formulation and implementation of democratic principles has received top most priority. Representation as a political concept acquires special importance in a democratic system more than in any other forms of government.

**Key words:** Women, Exploitation, Political participation, Election, Representation, Democracy.

**Introduction:**

Women have begun to argue that, they are being deprived of their just share in the governance because of lack of representation. It is essential to know how representation leads to empowerment of women. Sex discrimination is a universal phenomenon with difference in degree from country to country. The U.N.O. and I.C.H.R. have confirmed that sex discrimination prevailed all over the world. Involving women in the decision making process, gives them an opportunity to voice out their grievances and suppression. In other words she must be treated on par in all respects with man. When women are allowed to participate in the process of planning, formulation of policies, their implementation and decision-making, they exercise their authority over resources and ideology. If representation is given to women through reservation, it is going to strengthen the cause of women empowerment. In a tradition bound society like India, participation of women in public affairs, as of now, is absolutely limited. There is no self-motivation or built in motivation for them to come out of the conventional society. Therefore, pressure has to be exerted from outside to create an awareness among them and to bring them out to the mainstream. In a male dominated Indian setup woman representatives in elected bodies can exist only if certain seats are exclusively reserved for women. This brings about women empowerment in course of time.

**Early attempts of women empowerment through participation**

New Zealand is the first country to make constitutional provision for representation to women as early as in 1893. It was in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that many other countries followed the example of New Zealand. For instance, women representation was provided in Australia in 1902, Norway in 1906. Denmark in 1907, Ireland in 1915 and U.S.A. in 1921. After the World War II almost all the countries have made provision for women representation. Thus, the concept of women representation has paved way for women empowerment and the latter has received global recognition. Historically some special measures have strengthened the women representation. Some of them are:

- Convention on the Political Rights of Women-1952,
- The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women-1967 and
- Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Both 1952 and 1967 conventions made the following provisions and directed these must be mandatory in all the countries of the world: 1. Voting right to women, 2. Participation of women in the formulation of rules and regulations of government.
- The movement of women liberation received further impetus from the 1995 Beijing Conference held by HRC wherein the slogan 'Women Rights are Human Rights' was carved. Thus, it becomes clear that the concept of women political empowerment is not of very recent origin. The movement is becoming stronger and stronger with the passage of time.

## Women Political Participation in India:

Smt. Sarojini Naidu in this regard made the first attempt, in 1920. She went a long way in forcing the then British government to provide equal representation to women in Provincial Assembly. But her cry was futile as it did not bring about any transformation in favour of women. However, the adoption of the constitution of India ensured political, economic and social equality for all including women. Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 39(a), 39(d), 42, and 51(a) of the constitution contain provisions regarding women political representation and empowerment.

Despite of constitutional provisions for equality among men and women in India, over the years sex discrimination has widened. To overcome this kind of discrimination the government of India has implemented many measures from time to time, with a view to promote women empowerment. These measures such as economic, political, educational, health, social and others are exclusively for the upliftment of the status of women. Economic measures include training in self-employment, small industries etc. Political measures are providing representation in PRIs in recent years through women reservation, measures in the field of education include special scholarship to girls in primary and higher secondary schools and reservation in admission. Health related measures include special measure to pregnant women. This strengthened the case for providing reservation to women in order to get political representation.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) and Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) recommended for a nominal representation to women in the form of two representatives in each elected body of the Panchayat Raj Institutions. It was further stated that if no women came forward to become a representative, women representation must be ensured by co-opting two women as members for the elected body. The Committee on the National Perspective Plan for Women 1988 recommended that 30% seats in local self-government as well as the post of president and vice president of these bodies must be reserved for women.

Based on this recommendation, then the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi wanted to bring about the 64<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution with a view to bringing about uniformity in Panchayat Raj System (PRS) in India and ensuring women reservation. Unfortunately, it was a failure. However, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution of India have not only made the Panchayat Raj System, a national set up but also provided strength to local-self administration. These amendments provided for 33% reservation to women. It is important to note that this reservation is applicable to Panchayat Raj Institutions and urban local bodies including the post of President and Vice President but not to the State Legislative Assemblies and Parliament. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution provides reservation within reservation in the sense that in the total reservation for women there is reservation of seats in Panchayat Raj Institutions for SC, ST, BCM ('A' & 'B') and General category on the basis of the size of population within the locality. On account of this, women of all sections of society have an opportunity to actively participate in PRIs. This participation is in the form of preparation of action plan, collection of revenue, allocation of resources, identification of beneficiaries etc.

## Women representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions in Karnataka

The genesis of Panchayat Raj System in modern era can be found in 1862 and the rule of the Wodeyars of Mysore. It was in the form of 'Local Fund system'. The Local Board Act which was enacted in 1902 in Mysore province set ground for the establishment of three tier system of local government. There were Union Panchayats, Taluk Boards and District Boards. The number of representatives to Union Panchayats and District Boards was enhanced by the orders of 1918 and 1926. This measure was adopted to meet the growing need for providing representation to people in administrative bodies. In the post independence era, in Karnataka State Venkatappa Committee and Dr. H. Chandrashekaraiah committee were setup in 1950 and 1954 respectively. These committees recommended a lot of measures for strengthening Panchayat Raj System and improve its working. Subsequently, in 1959 Mysore Village Panchayats and Local Board Act was enacted. This Act made provision for reservation to SC, ST and BCM categories. The objective was to bring people of hitherto exploited classes to the mainstream. But none of these committees took up the issue of women representation. It was the 1983 Act of Karnataka that provided the major break through.

As late as in 1983 the government of Karnataka brought into force the Karnataka Zilla Parishad, Taluk Panchayat Samitis, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Act. Then the Chief Minister Mr. Ramakrishna Hedge and his cabinet colleague Mr. Abdul Nazir Saab were instrumental in enacting this Act. It was their election promise to ensure decentralization in administration and in fulfillment of this promise then Janata government in power established two tier system of local self-government namely Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat. It is held that the above said Act of 1983 was the first of its kind in the whole world in giving 25% reservation to women in representation to local bodies in Karnataka. In pursuance of 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the constitution in 1991, the government of India enacted the Panchayat Raj Act on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1992. It came into force on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1993. The Act made provision for the establishment of three tier Panchayat Raj System, throughout the country. As per the provisions of the Act it was mandatory to all the state governments to take necessary steps in establishing Panchayat Raj Institutions uniformly. A landmark provision of this Act was providing 33% reservation to women in total seats in PRIs. In the opinion of experts the women reservation policy adopted by Karnataka government in 1983 stood as an example on the basis of which 1993 Act provided for 33% reservation. Women reservation is applicable to the posts of president and vice president of PRIs as well, on rotation basis.

### Review of Literature:

Anne Phillip in her work 'The Politics of Presence' (1995) speaks to a large ambition i.e., to make our decision-making assemblies more genuinely deliberative. Representation has to include both accountability and relative autonomy, otherwise we are reduced to mere aggregation of initial preferences and interests. She says that, the argument for a more equitable representation of two sexes and different ethnic groups does move in close parallel with argument for a more participatory democracy.

Manin Bernard in her masterpiece, 'The Principles of Representative Government' (1997) argues that, representation is a technique that permitted the establishment of a government emanating from the people in large, diverse nation. She believes that consent constitutes the sole source of legitimate authority and forms the basis of political obligation.

Katheleen B. Jones in her book 'Compassionate Authority: Democracy and Representation of Women' (2013) takes up some of the most central debates in cotemporary feminist analysis and debate concerning the nature of the categories of feminist theory. She also explicated the position of authority in both feminist theory and practice.

Subha K. and B.S. Bhargava in an article entitled 'Feminism and Political Empowerment of Women at the Grass-root: The Karnataka Experience' (2000) widely discussed the aspects like feminism and its three main traditions, recommendations of the committees and commissions constituted to investigate the status of women in India, the need for empowering women in political, economic and social sphere and reservation as a major step and an instrument of political empowerment.

Anand Inbanathan in his working paper 'Representation and Accountability in Local Government: The Panchayats of Karnataka' (2001) widely discussed the aspects like representation, accountability, affirmity between representation and participation, the role of Grama Sabha, representatives' responsiveness to their constituency.

Vijayalakshmi V. and B.K. Chandrashekar in 'Gender Inequality, Differences and Identities: Women and Local Government in Karnataka' (2000) states that, gender inequality and differences among women are important for our understanding of their participation process in local governance. They argue that the involvement of women in the public and private spheres give them 'dual identity' often giving priority to the latter. Caste and class identity, low education levels was perceived as other two important factors in women representatives' marginal participation or nonparticipation.

### **Objectives of the study:**

1. To understand the concept of political participation and its role in women empowerment in general.
2. To trace the genesis of Women participation in Panchyat Raj Institutions in Karnataka.
3. To find out the role of women in good governance at the grass root level.
4. To ascertain the changes in the social status of women after being elected to Panchyat Raj Institutions.
5. To suggest measures for its effective implementation in Karnataka.

### **Data Collection:**

The research was carried out with the help of both Primary and Secondary data. Primary data was procured using several techniques. Method of questionnaire was primarily used to elicit information about role and status changes of women after being elected to Panchayat Raj Institution. Direct Personal Interview and some time, Method of Schedule was also adopted to collect the required information.



Secondary data was collected through Books, articles published in various national and international journals, websites, documents such as government orders, circulars, attendance of members, proceedings of full body and standing committee meetings are collected for analysis. Since the main focus of the study is on the empowerment of women through their representation, one of the variables selected was elections. Reports of the Election commission and the committees has been collected which provide necessary information about the political representation and government efforts- legislative and administrative towards women's empowerment. The researcher has also collected secondary data through the news coverage in the columns of the news papers.

### **Pilot Survey:**

To test the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot survey was carried out by using the final version of the questionnaire prepared. It helped the researcher to find out whether the language used was simple, appropriate and was easily understood by those for whom it was circulated and also to establish the reliability of the test. The Kannada version of the questionnaire was administered to the elected members and non-members. On the basis of the insight from the pilot survey necessary modifications were made in the inventory.

### **Scope of Research:**

The researcher intends to discover the potential of rural elected women members and how far they are able to give expression concerning the social, political and economic aspects of Panchayat Raj Institutions in rural setting. The present study may be regarded as relevant and justifiable since no such comparative study has been done so far. This would mean an investigation into the working of these institutions and to throw light on the actual role played by the women representatives in solving the local problems and their influence on the decision-making process in the Panchayat Raj Institutions.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation:**

The extent of awareness among people to govern themselves and show their economic and political might is increasing. A cross-section analysis is made with a view to highlighting how the people of different age groups, socio-economic strata, education level and sex have been showing interest in participating in local self-governments. At this juncture it is essential to make a case for people's participation in local self-government in the Karnataka's context. It is needless to state that India is a democratic country and it has the background of having accepted the creation of welfare society and ensuring social and economic justice to all. Better governance becomes a possibility only when people, at all levels, participate in administration. To realize this objective, after independence, both the union government and state governments have resorted to decentralization in administration. Keeping this as basis, an attempt was made to study how Panchayat Raj Institutions have grown with the changing pattern of participation such as caste, community and sex in the three taluks under study. In Karnataka state, Panchayat Raj System began to flourish ever since Wodeyars' regime. Over the years the system has undergone several changes in administrative system and their powers

and functions. The formation of the Panchayat Raj system became very effective in the post independence era. That too, the drastic decision of the Janata Party government in 1983 brought a revolutionary change in the evolution of Panchayat Raj system in Karnataka and the success is regarded as a landmark in the history of local self-government.

Constitutional Amendment was made by the government of India in 1992 to bring about thorough transformation in PRS in the country. While, the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment is applicable to the rural local self-government and the 74<sup>th</sup> amendment is applicable to the urban local self-government. Because of the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment, three tier PRS came into existence replacing the two tier system. In addition, reservation for women was raised from 25% to 33% of the total number of seats. About 58.50% of women members expressed that factors such as male domination, traveling, household responsibilities, lack of education, lack of confidence etc. do not permit them to participate effectively in the affairs of PRIs. In fact 44.3% of male members have endorsed this opinion expressed by women members. However, male members do not endorse the opinion that male dominated social system is a real obstacle in the way of effective participation by women members. About 6.9% women members opined that there is absolutely no problem in so far as effective participation by women is concerned. They express that there are no real obstacles at all impeding political participation by women members. If at all women members have not actively participated in PRIs are only because of lack of political awareness among women members opined 8.9% of women members. In addition, illiteracy is undoubtedly a big obstacle.

### Conclusion:

A large number of women representatives expressed their opinion that as they have to take care of their families and they do not find much time to participate in the affairs of local or national politics. Housekeeping seems to be a predominant factor coming in the way of participation of women members. Those women who work as agricultural and hired laborers are of the view that their first priority is their work and therefore cannot pay much attention to the panchayat activities. But it is found that if women are given an opportunity to take part in the political participation, they work and enact on par with men and contribute immensely for improving the governance.

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