



Empowering Women In Panchayati Raj Institutions In India: Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are considered as Rural local Self Government. As defined that Panchayat is an association of village people, for doing administrative judicial or other public works. PRIs is considered as instruments of planned socio-economic development of millions who lives in villages. It can be considered as reflection of grassroots democracy. It provides people an opportunity to participate in the processes of democracy at the grass-roots. The provision of PRIs was included in the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution of India. PRIs were seen as means of ensuring democratic participation for rapid rural development. PRIs in India is comprising of three tiers, namely, Zilla Parishad at top level, Panchayat Samiti at middle level and Gram Panchayat at the lower level. Several commissions, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee, G.V. K. Rao Committee, L.M. Singhvi Committee were set up to strengthen PRIs and to fix the tier system. Women members found rarely on these bodies earlier, except as co opted members who were accorded little power. The Indian Parliament gave constitutional status to for inclusion of women through two amendments namely, 73rd Constitution Amendment for rural local self-government and 74th Conditional Amendment for urban local self-government. The major aspects in the Constitutional Amendment for women's inclusion and reflection of political empowerment in the form of reservation of one-third of the seats for women in local bodies, along with sub reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their regional populations. The provision of reservations in the system of local self-government in India has been greeted as an empowering process for women.

Keywords: - Panchayati Raj Institutions, Constitution, Reservation, Empowerment, Amendment, Committee, Democracy

Introduction

Panchayati Raj is a system of governance in which gram panchayats are the basic units of administration. It has 3 levels: village, block and district. At the village level, it is called Panchayat, the block-level institution is called the Panchayat Samiti and the district-level institution is called the Zilla Parishad.

Thus, a Gram Panchayat is composed of the elected representatives of the village. The Sarpanch, the political head of the Gram Panchayat, is also directly elected by the villagers. Sarpanch happens to be the president of the Panchayat and its executive head. Gram Panchayat provides the basic opportunity to the local people to reflect their needs, problems and opinion. Panchayat samiti is a local government body at the Intermediate level like Tehsil or Taluka, presently known as Block. The Panchayat Samiti is the link between the Gram Panchayat and the district administration. The samiti is elected for 5 years and is headed by the Chairman. Apart from, there is also a Deputy Chairman. The Zilla Parishad is the apex body of the Panchayat Raj System that stands at the headquarters of the district. It is headed by the President who presides over the meetings of the Parishad. Primarily, Zilla Parishad looks after the rural administration of the District. Members of the Zilla Parishad are elected from the district on the basis of adult franchise for a term of five years. Seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, backward classes and women.

Women Empowerment

The debate over participatory politics centers on the question of empowerment. The term empowerment in present context is considered as one of the development terms. It is taken an account for the empowerment of women group, non-governmental developments organizations, activists, politicians, government and international agencies. Empowerment is not only fostering personal identity, but shows broader analysis of human rights and social justice. Empowerment can be considered in bringing change in the distribution of power both in interpersonal relation and in institutions throughout society. Empowerment may be defined as the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and assert their voice and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. So, people through empowerment avail freedom of choice and action. It gives them to better influence the course of their lives and the decisions. Generally, women empowerment is considered as the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions on their personal development as well as shine in society.

The concept of empowerment is used as an alternative strategy to tackle the problems of woman's subjugation and segregation by integrating her, giving her due position and identity, power and share in the process of decision making and nation building. Empowerment in normal sense is associated with the process of enabling or authorizing individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. Empowerment is interconnected with certain key indicators. These are education and work participation of women, female autonomy (in the sphere of decision-making, mobility and access to economic resources. These are taken into consideration as an outcome and a process. Since last 50 years back awareness regarding empowerment in the society was unknown to the women. In 21st century, the present scenario is changed completely. Women are demanding to have equal participation in all the spheres of the activities.

So, empowerment is a process which is supposed to offer the capacity of taking decisions and actions for the collective upliftment to that section of the society which is at the wrong side of the poser hierarchy. The notion of empowerment is built on the premise that unequal participation in the development process breeds inequality in different spheres of life. Since constraints to the equal participation of women in the development

process are structural and connected to the larger political economic and social environment in which they live; the most striking question for our current engagement should be: can interventions such those of Panchayati Raj intuitions (PRIs) can play an important role in reducing structural constraints for women. The individual's capacity and action largely determined by the domestic macro structures (Physical, economic, socio-cultural and political) in which she lives. If an individual has less scope and freedom to act and behave in these structures, she/ he has to be at weak side of the hierarchy in the society. Thus, empowerment can take place when there is a positive change in the relation between the individual and the structures, that is, when an individual has greater role to play and behave in the macro and domestic environment in which she / he lives.

The development of mental capacity is another vital characteristic of empowerment. Thus, mental development is facilitated by her membership of a collective that is addressing a similar problem or is collectivized around a common mandate. Knowledge of the structures of power within which lives are placed plays a crucial role to unrelease a process of empowerment. Such knowledge changes self-perception and brings about an awareness of the implications of oppression. Groups in sharing experiences often gain in strength and solidarity. Apart from these kinds of information, knowledge about matters related to livelihoods, finances, political processes etc. Also, women equip to be able to take action in order to change the situation they find themselves in. However, the challenge is that participation of women in the PRIs increase their level of knowledge.

Empowerment theoretically and practically gives idea to women to realize their full destiny and powers in all spheres of life. A women's empowerment starts with consciousness perceptions about herself and her rights, her capabilities and her potentials, awareness of how gender and socio- cultural and political forces affect her. Political empowerment, economic development and social upliftment of women are the means for checking different forms of patriarchal domination, and discrimination at every stage. In fact, empowerment of women fulfils triple goals, namely, equality, development and social justice. In order to achieve such goals, political empowerment of women is highly needed. So, in a democratic system, women participation can be considered at two levels. First one is awareness and assertion of women political rights and second one is acquisition and exercise of power.

The UNDP Human Development Report of 1995 says: "Investing in women's capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only valuable in itself but also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development". The report further states "Human development is impossible without gender equality. As long as women are excluded from the development process, development will remain weak and lopsided. Sustainable human development implies engendering the development paradigm".

At the global level, efforts are made for empowerment of women by the development planners and policy makers. The "declaration of the International Women's Year (1975) and the Decade of women (1976-1985) by the United Nations led to the globalization of women's issues". Thus, empowering women got worldwide attention. Many nations including India gave the signatories to the policies adopted at the

international convention of elimination of all kinds of discrimination against women (CEDAW). In consequence, following global level efforts for empowering women, the 'National Policy for Empowerment of Women' was officiated by the Government of India in the year 2001. Accordingly, the year 2001 has been declared as 'Women Empowerment year'. Then a number of gender perspective issues have been included in the policies and programmes. Now, India is in process to achieve sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Women's inclusion in PRIs

Currently, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India is comprising of three tiers, namely, Zilla Parishad at top level, Panchayat Samiti at middle level and Gram Panchayat at the lower level. The said PRIs are considered as Rural local Self Government. Before independent, India also witnessed existence of panchayat at the village level. Dr. John Mathai viewed "Panchayat is an association of village people, for doing administrative judicial or other public works". PRIS is considered as instruments of planned socio-economic development of millions who lives in villages. It can be considered as reflection of grassroot democracy. It provides people an opportunity to participate in the processes of democracy at the grass-roots.

The provision of PRIS was included in Article 40 of the Directive Principles of the Constitution of India. Thus, it lacked strong constitutional characteristics. By the late fifties, several states did set up PRIs of the village, block and district levels. PRIs were seen as means of ensuring democratic participation for rapid rural development. However, since there was no constitutional support, political will and adequate powers or resources, these PRIs started languishing. Women were rarely on these bodies, except as co opted members who were accorded little power. Several commissions, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), Ashok Mehta Committee (1977), G.V. K. Rao Committee (1985), L.M. Singhvi Committee (1987) were set up to examine ways in which it could be strengthened. In 1988, a Parliamentary Sub-Committee recommended that Panchayati Raj be given connotational recognition. In 1992 the Parliament gave constitutional status to PRIs. On 22nd & 23rd December 1992, two amendments were made. These were 73rd Constitution Amendment for rural local self-government and 74th Conditional Amendment for urban local self-government. Within a year all the states of India passed their own acts in conformity with the amended constitutional provisions. As a consequence, India moved towards further a step for decentralization of power. The major aspects in the Connotational Amendment for women's 'political empowerment' in the form of reservation of one-third of the seats for women in local bodies, along with sub reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their regional populations. Initially, women found it difficult to enter this new political arena because political parties and vested interest groups took advantage of the situation. Women were only rubber stamps, with men continuing to hold power. It reflected in the form of proxy systems in PRIs.

Even now many women elected to the local bodies / panchayats are surrogates for husband and father who could not contest because of the precondition of reservation. Today recognition for outstanding women leaders in the Panchayats is prompted by instituting yearly awards for achievements in the field of women's economic status, campaigning against child marriage and child labour, bringing piped water supply provision, building health centres, strengthening primary schools and self-help groups. The provision of reservations in

the system of local self-government in India has been hailed as an empowering process for women, since it has not only brought women out of their houses and into the public place, but it has also given a voice and platform to express themselves as more effective participants as well as about right and structures of power. Advocates of Women's representation in PRIs claim that participation in the institutional process empowers women. However, women in PRIs do not necessarily get the power that their seat and position accords to them. Access to the seat does not guarantee control over resources, participation in decision making and functioning effectively as a leader.

Odisha Context

Today, women in Orissa constitute half of the total population. The implementation of one-third reservation of seats for women in PRIs is quite reflective. Late Biju Pattnaik, the former Chief Minister of Odisha was the first person who advocated women involvement as a tool to unleash vast creative potential and dynamism for the benefit of the society. He was first to give women their due share of political rights and political power and access to decision making. Local bodies in Odisha were entrusted with additional power and 30% of seats in PRIs were kept reserved for women in Odisha by an Act in 1991. According to this Act, if the Sarapanch is a male, the Naib Sarapanch has to be a woman. However, since the enforcement of 73rd amendment Act of 1992, a large number of women, have found place in the panchayat bodies.

Prior to 1992, elections to panchayat institutions in Odisha were held in 1975 and 1984. In 1975 election, out of 1962 Sarapanchas 20 were women and out of 56,270 ward members only 103 were women. In 1984 there were only 11 women Sarapanchas and the number of women ward members rose to 125. In 1992 elections, of 92,870 members in grampanchayats and panchayat samities, 28,068 were women. But the 1997 panchayat elections could see a greater rise in women participation. Of the members elected to the PRIs, about 35% belonged to women. Of the said elected women 10 became Chairpersons of the Zilla Parishads, when 294 women were the members therein. When 114 women could be Chairpersons of Panchayat Samities, 1862 became Sarapanchas of Gram Panchayats. While the women members in Panchayat Samities grew to 1870, their number in Gram Panchayats rose to 28,595. On the whole, the 1997 Panchayat elections accommodated 32,745 women representatives. In 2002 PRIs elections in Odisha women membership in Zilla Parishads increased to 296. When their membership in Panchayat Samities rose to 2186, it became 31,414 in Gram Panchayats. Total number of women representatives increased to 36,094 in 2002. On the other hand, elections of 2007 found 1288 women contested for membership in Zilla Parishad. It means there was an increase of 222 number of women contestants in comparison to 2002 elections. The PRIs election in 2012, 2017 and 2022 saw a greater number of women representatives in Odisha. The aforesaid statistical analysis reveals that PRIs have encouraged women for political participation in Odisha. The degree of women participation can be more when political parties will reserve 50% of their party membership for women and the Women Reservation Bill is enacted by the Parliament. In addition, the Civil Society must work towards ensuring greater participation of women in politics.

Conclusion

It is pertinent to note that the 73rd Amendment Act has made it obligatory for one-third reservation for women in the elected local councils. Even the office of Chairperson has been reserved for the women. Such reservation has been extended to the SCs and STs. Thus, the 73rd Amendment has provided for women's reservation across caste and class. Now all panchayats at every level have at least one-third women members. They can contest for other seats too. And one-third of panchayats at each level from district to village will be headed by women chairpersons. This mandated minimum one-third reservation has legitimated entry of women in the mainstream of politics at the grass-root level and has created a political space for women. It is a major step for inclusion of women in politics. Following the 73rd Amendment Act, several women have become elected members of the PRIs. However, it needs to be examined whether this massive rise in the numerical strength of women has brought about substantive changes in the status of women, especially in the status of traditionally deprived SCs and STs women. In order to throw light on the said problem, the subsequent paragraphs are devoted to an analysis of some of the major important works on the position of women in local bodies.

The PRIs in Orissa saw a great change under the 73rd Amendment Act of 1992. As per the provisions of the Act, the rural government system has been reconstructed and additional functions have been assigned to these bodies. State Finance commission has been constituted in Orissa. The State Election Commission is now empowered to conduct the local elections in every five years. Due reservation for women, SCs, STs, etc have been made in local councils. Women representation in such councils has been remarkably increased and women leadership is now well found.

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