

ROLE OF WOMAN IN PANCHAYTI RAJ INSTITUTIONS: PROBLMES AND SUGGESTIONS TO STRENGTHEN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

The Indian woman's position in the society further deteriorated during the medieval period when Sati among some communities, child marriages and a ban on widow remarriages became part of social life among some communities in India. The Muslim conquest in the India subcontinent brought the purdah practice in the Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practised. In some part of India, the Devadasis or the temple women were sexually exploited. Polygamy was widely practised especailly among Hindu Kshatriya rulers. In many Muslim families, women were restricted to Zenana areas.

Key Words : Discrimination, Employment, Participate, Community, Illiteracy, Villages

Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. Indira Gandhi, who served as Prime Minister of India for an aggregate period of fifteen years is the world's longest serving woman Prime Minister.

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality, no discrimination by the State, equality of oppportunity, equal pay for equal work. In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of woman and children, renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women, and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief.

Women by virtue of their gender, experience discrimination in terms of denial of equal access to power structure that controls society and determines development issues and peace initiatives. Further the United Nations' report on women has pointed out that women perform two-thirds of world's work receive only 10 per cent of the world's income and own only one per cent of the means of production. Women suffer discrimination in treatment, employment, education. Discrimination takes different forms from domestic violence to

premeditated killing (e.g. dowry deaths). The difference in sex ratio, the female literacy rate, the life span, mortality and morbidity speak volumes about the gender bias that is practiced in society. Women have a higher death rate than men from the age 0-4, mostly owing to neglect and lower food allotment and from age 20-39 when work is most intense and pregnancies most frequent. Similarly, in the case of life expectancy, India is one of the few countries where women have a shorter life expectancy.

Also women in India reel under the pressure of irregular employment, under-employment, frequent termination of employment, dowry harassment, sati, poor nutrition, inadequate prenatal and natal care, rape and single parenthood. Women have been marginalised even at the level of policies for women. This power equation is mainly due to the socio-cultural attitude in both men and women. Power equation can be brought about only by change in societal conditions and attitudinal change in women and men. This undoubtedly can become a reality in the panchayat raj system. Women have been given a chance to redefine their power through two processes. By occupying positions in panchayat and by virtue of their positions creating conditions for women to raise their status. When the administrative body consists of one-third of women, decisions can be made and remade towards empowering women. Women should rise to the occasion in great numbers. Studies carried out by the Institute of Social between 1987 and 1990 in Karnataka and another in 1991 in Kerala have shown that women did take part in large measures in Panchayati Raj Institutions. In Kerala they even fought non-reserved constituencies for women.

Unless the first stage of empowerment in terms of contesting and winning PRI's elections is possible, the second stage of empowerment is not possible. Redefining their power lies in achieving these two pre-conditions.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Indian Constitution have served as a structure for women. The PR is will play a central role in the process of enhancing women's participation in public life. The PRIs and the local self-Governments will be actively involved in the implementation and execution of the National Policy for women at the grassroots level.

It is indeed a sad state of affairs that women's participation in public life or governance has not been encouraging. There were only 36 women members in the Union Council of Ministers including a Prime Minister from August 1947 to February 1993. The experience with panchayat elections in Karnataka, Maharaashtra and West Bengal show that gender bias, upper caste domination, assetlessness, illiteracy and ignorance were the major impediments in women taking part in PRIs. Also women lacked self-confidence. This shows that mere rights or opportunities will not guarantee participation. There are a number of pre-requisites

for women to use their rights gainfully. Multiple strategies need to be worked out to enable them to overcome these obstacles. Social and family barriers keep women's motivation to take part in public life a low ebb. Hence in each village motivation camps may be conducted for local women.

In a country where 6 out of 10 women are illiterate, women empowerment should begin with empowering women with literacy. It is not only necessary that more women participate, but the right women participate. We should locate women of caliber and leadership qualities in each panchayat area. Training must be given before and after election. They need to be trained in the art of administration, polity and finance as they are to be equipped to shoulder responsibilities. Information on problem relating to the area, those faced by women in particular, information regarding services, welfare schemes, procedures and methods of management must be included in their training. General awareness and political awareness need to be created. Also knowledge in the functions of Panchayati Raj Institutions their role, their rights and duties is vital. Last but not the least, it is imperative that women functionaries are provided with adequate arrangements for child care and domestic work so that they can concentrate on their public responsibilities.

Experience coupled with training will make women come out of the stage of subordination. Women have shown examples of determined with to take part in Panchayati Raj Institutions in the states of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa and West Bengal by taking part in large number and winning elections. Experiences have shown that empowering women alone is not sufficient. It should go hand in hand with gender sensitisation among male administrative machinery, policy and legal system.

Now, majority of women representatives are no more proxy of their male relative patrons so percent of women representatives are now taking their own decision to contest elections. This is a big achievement. 15 percent of women Pradhans are able to win election second time. Women belonging to younger age groups of 21-35 years have shown better performance compared to the women belonging to the age group of 35 years and above. Women members of active committees at village level were found to be more successful at Panchayat level. Again quoting the Report, Dalits we also benefited by the whole process. Reservation has inspired and prompted them to contest elections. There can be no greater evidence for the fact that not only has Panchayati Raj attracted women to politics in large numbers but also that this with to contest for elections seems to be most keenly felt among the women belonging to the SCs and STs.

SOME OF THE MAJOR PROBLEM FACED BY WOMEN IN PANCHYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

We cannot really be said to empower rural Indian women due to several factors like illiteracy, language barriers, inexperience or low respect among fellow villagers. These are some of the main problems besetting active participation of women in the decision-making. In many cases because of lack of availability of forums and lack of proper grievance redressed mechanism for gender related issues. Most of women elected representatives in decision making and mostly they are dummy.

The women are still considered one of the neglected categories in some of the regions of India. There should be a separate quorum attendance at Gram Sabha meetings. In view of the crucial importance of adequate women's participation in meetings of the gram Sabana, a sub-quorum of female attendance should be build into the required quorum. Moreover, provision may be made that meetings of the gram sabha be preceded by meetings of the Mahila Sabha, comprising all adult women voters of the village panchayat, to ensure that gender concerns and preferences get fully reflected in the proceedings of the gram sabha.

SUGGESTIONS TO STRENGTHEN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

- Increase in articulation, knowledge and awareness on health, nutrition reproductive right, law literacy.
- Change in role and responsibility in family and community;
- Visible increase on decrease in violence on women and girls.
- Responses to, changes in social customs like child marriage, dowry, discrimination against widows;
- Visible changes in women's participation level attending meeting, participating and demanding participation;
- Increase an decrease in personal leisure time and time for child care;
- Increase access to and ability to gather information;
- Increase on decrease of work lads in new programmes;
- Positive changes in social attitudes;
- Awareness and recognition of women's economic contribution within and outside the household;
- Women's decision-making over her work and income.

Though 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. Thus has been most effective formal step towards political empowerment of women. There are many instances where women have been self motivate to fight an election. In several instances, the Gram Sabha has persuaded women with leadership potential to stand for elections.

The discussion on the different cases indicates the women's participation, their role performance and also problems faced by them in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. It is also notable that the women by virtue of their leadership position in Panchayati Raj Institutions are playing pro-active role and taking steps to address the needs of the women. One of the most significant impacts of the provisions and reservation for women and the disadvantaged sections in Panchayati Raj Institutions is encouraging. Since it has improved their awareness and perception that influence them to claim for their equitable share in the decentralised decision-making process. The participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions has given more opportunity to voice their view, bring their priorities to the focus and express their problems in the forum of decision-making at grassroots level.

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