



PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN TELANGANA STATE

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ABSTRACT:

Participation of women in the political field and in various decision-making bodies is an important tool for empowerment. The participation of women at all levels of governance structures is the highest need of this hour for women's actual empowerment. Women's political empowerment, usually viewed as political involvement in government or elections which is essential to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives. Political participation of women in India has been neglected even since independence. Political system and decision making process is seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 gave them not less than one-third reservations in the PRIs at all the levels. This has been enhanced to 50 percent in some of the states in the recent years. Women's participation has been increasing rapidly but it is not satisfactory. Empowerment in any sphere plays an important role in molding the social, economic, and political life of people in all communities. As such, empowerment is a universal phenomenon. Unfortunately, women, who constitute about half of the total population, did not enjoy any political rights in the past in any society. In the Indian context, the political participation of women and ultimately their political empowerment have gained a lot of prominence.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, Political Participation, PRI's.*

INTRODUCTION:

Indian environment is predominantly rural. Even today, more than 70 per cent people live in rural areas. The focus on rural development started with the realisation of the fact that the rural sector is less developed economically, socially and politically and needed special attention of the government. The Community

Development Programme was launched in 1952 covering the entire nation. Later on, the institutional arrangements were made. This institutional arrangement is known as Panchayati Raj. Panchayati Raj is assigned the task of uplifting the weaker sections, which include women. But when the system was introduced, few women contested or got elected. If the women are not elected, they are coopted. So the participation of women had been minimal or negligible. In the light of this minimal representation, the Committee on the Status of Women recommended for representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions by means of reservation. This is provided by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. It should be noted that equality in all spheres is inseparable from active political participation and the national development is more effective if every citizen, irrespective of being a man or woman, has an equal share in all activities.

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important. Empowerment occurs within sociological, psychological, economic spheres and at various levels, such as individual, group, and community and challenges our assumptions about the status quo, asymmetrical power relationships and social dynamics.

Empowerment by means of education, literacy or modest income-generating projects is clearly insufficient to ameliorate the prospects for a higher quality of life for women. The process of empowerment is taking place at so many levels that it is quite difficult to gauge the actual nature and extent of empowerment in improving status of women. Certainly the process is entangled in the struggles of civil society against the state, and under the weight of historical practice and ongoing debates over the appropriate role of ideologies (Sheetal Sharma, 2006:14).

Political empowerment of women in rural India has assumed considerable significance in contemporary times. This is because of the passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which is the result of the efforts of Indian women's movement. This is a historic step of far-reaching implications and has significant impact on the political processes in rural India.

SCENARIO AFTER 73RD AMENDMENT:

It is the Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act, which seems to have provided some real basis for bringing women into the power structure at the base i.e. the Panchayat level. While reserving one-third seats for the Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes in the Panchayat area, one-third of such seats shall be specifically reserved for women belonging to SC/ST sections, provide the Act as per Article 243D(2) Article 243D(3) provides that not less than one-third (including the women's SC/ST seats) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. Further, the Act provides for reservation of SC/ST and women, in the offices of Chairpersons of the Panchayats at the village or any other level. The intentions of the

Act are thus clear. Power has to devolve to the people at the grassroots, and specific provisions have been made for those sections which have suffered through centuries of stark exploitation by being kept out of power and depriving them of education, property and power i.e. the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. The Act enables thousands of SC/ST women candidates to take power in their own hands and use it for the betterment of their condition.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment is considered as the 'greatest event' for women's empowerment and a milestone in bringing women into participation in political process. The importance of the amendment is that it brought the women mainly the underprivileged women into governance giving scope for them to take part in political and developmental affairs at local level, which is the very foundation of the democratic structure of the country. The amendment is particular that women should find representation in rural political institutions in the capacity of chairpersons as well as members. Care is taken to provide representation to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Castes Women at all three levels in Panchayati Raj Institutions.⁶ Women have been provided access to power sharing, co-decision making and co-policy making at Panchayat level. This gives women an opportunity to influence decision-making process, planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of Rural Development Programmes and to integrate them into the political system.

India is considered as the first country to recognize the social fact of social engineering i.e., giving women an opportunity to participate in adequate numbers in Panchayati Raj Institutions. This is intended to be done by taking concrete measures to draw women into leadership positions and thereby into politics by giving them one-third reservation in the third tier of governance i.e., the Panchayati Raj.

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:

Women's political empowerment, usually viewed as political involvement in government or elections which is essential to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives. Economic, social and political empowerments of women are jointly reinforcing. Economic empowerment implies that women have the power to make their own decisions and leading to prosperity for families and the society in which they live in. Social empowerment often liberates women from exploitation and mistreatment that curb women from reaching their potential at the fullest. Economic empowerment can provide women to be empowered politically. Political empowerment allows women to take control of the policies that will benefit their economic standing. Social empowerment further strengthens women to participate economically and politically, which in turn reinforces women's standing in society. To be fully empowered, women have to take power for themselves. Women's business associations are one such example of women to empower themselves. By networking and communicating to build better businesses, women gain economic empowerment. When women have both economic and political power, they become full members of society and can have a louder voice when advocating policies.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA:

Political participation of women in India has been neglected even since independence. Though our country has adopted democratic system of government and the women constitute 48.9 per cent of population of the country, but their political participation is very low. Due to various constraints they could not occupy the positions of power and assume leadership roles. Women's participation has been increasing rapidly but it is not satisfactory. They are also denying opportunities to participate in the administration, even in the making of decisions that affect their life and welfare. Though Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi had believed that women had a positive role to play in the reconstruction of society and the recognition of their equality was an essential step to bring about social justice. This added to the massive participation by the women in the freedom movement and had a direct impact on the political and social elite, including women.

After independence, when the constitution was adopted women like Smt. Sarojini Naidu, Hansa Mehta, Renuka Roy, Durgabai Desmukh etc. took part in the constitution-making. In our Constitution there is guarantee of equality and dignity of the individual and it claimed the fundamental rights of women to political and legal equality and guaranteed non-discrimination in employment and office under the states. Our Constitution had provided many channels for the development and progress of the women. The preambles of the Constitution, the chapters of Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of the State Policies etc., are the specific objectives of this purpose. These constitutional provisions are meant to empower 48.9 per cent women population in India. Many government and non-government agencies are working for the development of women but in practice we find a wide gap between the stated social objectives and achievements, between the legal framework and empirical realities, between the symbolism and actuality. And this is the reason that after these constitutional safeguards and legal frameworks, the participation is still very low. There are three indicators to assess the political participation of women.

- i. Participation in the political process as the voters and candidates in election.
- ii. Political attitudes such as awareness commitment and involvement in politics and autonomy in political action and behavior.
- iii. Their impact on the political process.

ROLE OF PRIS AND GOVERNMENT IN DEVELOPING WOMEN LEADERSHIP:

While studies affirm the need for the policy of reservation for women, in many PRIs headed by women, not only has the participation and leadership made an impact on grass-root governance, it has also shattered many of the supposed myths such as inability to handle power and responsibility outside their homes. The political empowerment and assumption of leadership role resulting from the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, therefore, has had an impact in two socio-political areas. There is, first of all, a visible improvement in the administration and delivery of services at Gram Panchayat level mainly, or of greater focus on the felt needs of

the people, greater transparency, greater reliance on horizontal linkages and greater participation of people particularly women members of the village community. Secondly the Amendment has made possible the creation of political space, which has enabled women to attain social status, confidence and to alter the age-old strange hold of repressive tradition. One of the very special features of this constitutional amendment is that it contains what Buch (1998) describes as ‘guarantee of representation is for the earlier marginalized group and that happens to be women’.

Elected women might become role models for other women and for the adolescent girls. Even in a country as large as India, there is a significant number and cannot, but revolutionize and transform things in what was till recently a static rural society. It is not that women have succeeded in every PRI but a large majority could do it and that is what makes it exhilarating. Documenting the changes that have occurred, several researchers, political analysts, NGOs, journalists, both Indian and foreign, have observed that within the village the funds are better utilized, and the focus of the PRIs has shifted from political power games practicality to making arrangements for drinking water, school education, health care and dealing with problems relating to sanitation and fuel.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. Nature and effectiveness of participation of Women members in PRIs.
2. The level awareness of rights and responsibilities among elected Women members.
3. Future aspiration of elected Women members.
4. Opinion of the public as also of male members regarding the participation of elected Women members.

METHODOLOGY:

The secondary data will collect through review of literature, books, magazines, periodicals, journals, studies, reports, and official documents on Panchayat Raj Institutions.

WOMEN AND PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN TELANGANA STATE:

Many experts on the subject of grass-root democracy believe that 1/3 reservation paved way for women to exercise their political rights in local self-governance and created an enabling environment for women's participation in the grass-root politics. Though women issues have been politically neglected and women were being treated as second-class citizens, the fact that, women entry into provincial politics to certain extent challenge the social stigmas attached to political power. This necessitated a constant search for ways and means to empower, promote awareness and increase the participation of women in the decision-making levels of PRIs. Notwithstanding, women panchayat members in Telangana State have made attempts to break these social barriers and raise their voices.

Telangana is a new state in India to establish the PRIs in the year 1959. The State Legislature created a

three-tier PR set-up under Andhra Pradesh Praja Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act, 1959, provided for co-option of two women. The Andhra Pradesh Gram Panchayat Act (APGPA), 1964, governed the composition and functions of the GP in Andhra Pradesh. This Act provided for reservation of two seats for women if the total strength of the gram panchayat is 9 or less, 3 seats if the strength is between 10 and 15 and 4 seats if the strength is more than 15. It is clear that the Act ensured between 22 per cent to 25 per cent of representation of women in these bodies. In the middle level bodies, till 1986, women's representation was governed by the Andhra Pradesh Praja Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act of 1959, which provided for co-option of two women for each Samiti in addition to the possibility of women members finding membership in Panchayat Samithis through the electoral process. Based on the recommendations of Ashok Mehta Committee Report, the MPP, Zilla Praja Parishad Abhivrudhi Mandal Bill was introduced in Legislative Assembly in July 1986 which completely altered the PRIs set-up in Andhra Pradesh and in 1987, a new reservation set-up was introduced for Backward Castes (BCs) and Women, i.e., 9 percent. Thus, women got further encouragement to share the democratic decision-making process of PRIs.

ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES:

Participation and Decision-Making The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life. The power relations that prevent women from leading fulfilling lives operate at many levels of society, from the most personal to the highly public. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning. Equality in political decision-making performs a leverage function without which it is highly unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension in government policy-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

GRASS-ROOTS POLITICAL PARTIES AND WOMEN:

Political parties are the life elements which keep the means of communication between the government and the people. They act as instruments to crystalise people's aspirations into party's manifestos for implementation. The parties are important aids in transforming the multitude of un-coordinated public wills into an evident public will. It is the power of the parties in electing candidates to office which is the source of their strength in influencing the course of policy decisions and administrative programmes.

CONCLUSION:

Women's political empowerment, usually viewed as political involvement in government or elections which is essential to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives. Women representation in PRIs is an important criterion for assessing their role in politics. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has a significant landmark of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. It provides not less than one-third reservations in the PRIs at all the levels. Through the implementation of 33 per cent reservation in panchayats women have got an opportunity to raise their concerns and opinion in gram Sabha. As a result, women's participation has been increasing rapidly but it is not satisfactory. Most of the studies conducted after the passing of 73rd Amendment Act on empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The studies revealed that with the provision of 33 per cent reservation clause, the number of women in Panchayathi Raj bodies has significantly increased. But the dominance of men persists because of patriarchal culture, traditional outlook and low percentage of literacy among women. There are many women who have not only remained powerless but have become dummies for other powerful forces. The proportion of such leaders is alarming high. The opportunity created by the policy makers to bring about gender equity in governance has not been completely translated into reality.

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