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## AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON PANCHAYAT RAJ

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### ABSTRACT:

Indian women belong to the most deprived sections of society, having been segregated, exploited and assigned a secondary status of depravity, inferiority vis-a-vis their male counterparts. Backward class women suffer a double deprivation both as women and as women from disadvantaged section belonging to the lower rungs of social ladder. Underlining the parity of the genders Gandhiji observed, "Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities, she has the right to participate in the minute details of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he by sheer force of a vicious custom, the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have". The aim of empowerment is to address the role of powerlessness to play in creating and perpetuating personal social problems. It can be distinguished by its focus on developing critical awareness with increased feelings of collective and self-efficiency, developing skill for personal, inter-personal social change.

**KEYWORDS:** Vulnerable, Marginalized, Discrimination, Safeguard, Emancipation.

The social depravity of Backward Caste Women was clearly reflected in terms of socio-economic and political indicators which show them occupying the subservient position in the Indian Society. The Constitution of India provides equal rights for all the citizens irrespective of socio-economic, religious status, but these provisions couldn't yield results in terms of ensuring mobility of the deprived sections even today decades. India as a Welfare State is committed to the welfare and development of its people, in general and of vulnerable sections, in particular, on an egalitarian plane. The government has special concern and commitment for the well being of the socially disadvantaged groups. The planning in the post Independent era focused on the social amelioration of the weaker sections through educational and

economic upliftment programmes. Women also constituted as belonging to this disadvantaged section. The Constitution of India envisaged providing equality of opportunity to all the citizens through provision of protective discrimination and also political participation. The planned efforts to emancipate women educationally and economically did not yield the desired results over the decades that followed Independence. Beginning with 1980's began the efforts of political empowerment, as it was perceived to give women the needed fillip to an onward surge towards all round development and to a status of respectability and partnership in decision making.

To make political empowerment of women, a reality, the issue of reservation of 1/3 of the seats for women at the grass-level organization was taken by women's organizations and the social activists. The Government of India passed the 73rd and 74th Amendments, which paved the way for women's political participation at the grass root level Panchayati Raj institutions. It was expected that the Panchayati Raj Institution would ensure political empowerment and a betterment of their social status removing the social and economic discrimination against them.

Empowerment means the process by which power is gained, developed, sized, felicitated or given empowerment may be broadly defined as the control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. Empowerment therefore is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces which marginalized the disadvantaged sections in a given context. In India, a low caste woman currently feels empowered when she is given a fair hearing in a public meeting, which comprises of men and women from different social and economic groups. Empowerment in the human services has emerged from efforts to develop more effective and responsive services of 'women and other disadvantaged groups.

Empowerment in its simple form means the manifestation of the redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance, both a process and the result of the process. It seeks to change the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate it, pave the way for women to gain access to and control of materials as well as information resources.

The concept of Women's empowerment appears to be the result of a number of important critical discussion and dialogues and debates generated by women throughout the world and getting intellectual resources. Control over ideology signifies the ability generate capacity to propagate, capacity to sustain and institutionalize specific sets of belief principles, values, attitudes, action and behaviours, Virtually' determining how people perceive, think and function in a given Socio-economic and political environment.

The real empowerment can take place only if women are turned from weaker section and passive beneficiaries into a valuable human resource of unique strength, and to be integrated in our development efforts. Empowerment of women is strengthening of their innate vitality which can be done through acquirement of knowledge, power and experience. Power is not power to dominate but power to reduce helplessness and effectiveness. No account of Constitutional guarantee of equality will help promote women's social transformation unless they become empowered persons. Realizing women's subjugation and subordination and affirmative discrimination against women, in general, has emerged in the need of their empowerment, both political and economic. Here, empowerment refers to exercise of power guaranteed by the Constitution to woman in Panchayati Raj to get rid of different types of socio-economic disabilities.

**OBJECTIVES:**

This paper examines the political empowerment of Backward Caste women through participation in Panchayati Raj and to know the impact that the political empowerment has wrought in the status of Backward Caste women in grass-root of Panchayati Raj.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:**

- The empowerment of women through political participation became a reality through passing of the historic 73rd Amendment to the Constitution paving way for the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj to ensure their participation in the decision making process.
- The active participation of women in the decision making process is to begin at the Gram Panchayat level. It was made that 33 percent of reservation for women at all tiers of Panchayat so as to get the elected women to safeguard the interests of the village and in particularly of women and children. Adequate training and authority have to be given to them to ensure their effective participation and smooth governance.

Backward Classes women who form sizable portion of the population becoming Sarpanches signaled the dawn of The era of women's political empowerment propelling women for their all round development. The following are the major findings of the study.

1. It is heartening to know that women in their prime adult age are entering politics, which indicates the enthusiasm and interest they exhibit to come forward to participate in the process of planning for development.
2. It is observable that 63.10 per cent of the respondents are illiterates. It was only 9.52 percent are with education levels of high school education and above.
3. The overall inference is that all the respondents have minimum of land holdings which is an indicator of their economic status in their rural areas. Based on the sample it is observed that owning a land certainly enhances a person's political stature particularly in the rural areas.
4. The income levels of the families of Backward Caste Sarpanches are in the category lower middle and lower classes.
5. The basic social institutions viz. family and caste continue to be motivating factors for Backward Class women's entry into politics.

In the light of the findings listed above regarding the socio-economic profile and on the emergence and the performance of Backward Caste women leaders of Panchayati Raj, it can concluded that the process of emergence of Backward Caste women leaders is the same as in the case of men from these castes. The channels of emergence of rural leadership through caste, family status are widely operational even in the case of emergence of Backward Caste women leaders. Most of the women are from families with second and third generation of political participation. Therefore they must have had adequate political socialization.

The empowerment of Backward Class women is nothing significant except for these women occupying positions of power. The self appraisal of women leaders reveals that the empowerment they experienced is to large extent moderate considering the fact that women are not totally equipped and free from the influence of the traditional institutions which continue to sway the rural political scenario. No doubt the political reservations have opened the doors of local self government for the women to enter positions of power to partake in the decision making process.

The political empowerment has given the women a sense of confidence and opportunity for interest articulation which 'Would not have been possible without their entry into local self government. Women in political offices, has certainly broken the ice. A beginning has been made in the emancipation of Backward Class women through political empowerment. Given the constraints, the strides made by Backward class women through Panchayati Raj is certainly an indicator of the socio-political ascendance and indeed a step in the right direction. It is hoped that empowerment of women in general and backward class women in particular in the true sense of term, in all its dimensions will be a reality in the coming decades.

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