Women Empowerment through their Participation is a challengeable task in the Panchyati Raj system in India

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Abstract

Panchyati Raj is an integral part of the three-tier system of government in our country. The other two tiers are the Union Government and the state Government. Local Government is at the bottom of a pyramid of governmental institutions with the national Government at the top and the state Government occupying the middle range. Panchyati Raj operates both in urban and rural areas and is, therefore, classified as Urban Local Government and Rural Local Government respectively. The urban Local Government manifests itself in Urban Local Government institutions such as Municipal corporations, Municipal committees and Nagar panchayats. The Rural Local Government manifests itself in rural local institutions such as District panchayats, Taluk panchayats, Village panchayats and Gram sabhas.

A democratic form of Government must be sustained by a system of vigorous local self-governing institutions. Local Government institutions provide an opportunity to the people to participate freely and actively in the Government which they formulate for their areas. These are necessary to encourage and foster initiative, independence and enterprise on the part of the people. First prime minister of India, pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, while inaugurating the first Local self-Government Ministers' Conference in 1948, said, "Local self have got rather into the habit of thinking democracy at the top and not so much below. Democracy at the top may not be a success unless you build on its foundation from below."

Key words: Empowerment, Panchyati Raj and Women

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and a community .Empowerment refers to the relational nature of empowerment is about the extent to which some categories of people are able to control their own destinies, even when the people with whom they interact oppose their interests. Empowerment is the process of obtaining basic opportunities for marginalized people, either directly by those people, or through the help of non-marginalized others who share their own access to these opportunities. It also includes actively thwarting attempts to deny those opportunities. Empowerment also includes encouraging, and developing the skills for, self-sufficiency,

Women constitute half part of the society, but they are a way of political, social, economic and health opportunities. Women with disabilities have been largely neglected. Also due to many societal rules and regulations, they never are a part of the decision making process. Though at present women enjoy equal status with men as per the constitution and legal provisions but still, they have a long way to go. It is true and proved that "a country prosper if its women prosper". So women's empowerment is vital towards the development of the society. 'Empowerment' means 'to authorize'. In the context of the people, they have to be authorized to have control over their own lives. Empowerment is an only effective answer to oppression, exploitation, injustice and other melodies of society. In short, Women empowerment means to give women the opportunity to fulfill their creative capabilities and desires and take decisions independently. It has social, political, economic, cultural dimensions. The concept of empowerment started with the civil rights movement in the USA, in 1960. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)' was held in Cairo, in 1994 and further in 1995 the 'Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW)' was organized in Beijing. Both conferences recognized the significance of women empowerment and reaffirmed that reproductive health is an indispensable part of women's empowerment. The Government of India also implemented this agenda. As a result, the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCW) made efforts to make women strong, aware, and alert about their rights, health and social development. In India sixth five-year plan (1980-85) introduced Women's Empowerment programmes with an emphasis on 'awareness raising' and 'mobilization'. There has been a major shift in the policy from the concept of "welfare of women" in the 1970s to "development of women" in the 1980s and now from 1990s "empowerment of women". The Government of India has declared the year 2001 as a year for the Empowerment of Women, but the struggle to reach this stage has been long and arduous. Indian democracy is 68 years old now. The success of democracy depends upon the people participation, both men and women. The concern for women's political equality in India first emerged as a political issue during the national movement in which women were active participants. After 1932, Indian women have participated in the active politics. Women have held the posts of president and prime minister in India, as well as chief ministers of various states. In the year 1993, the Government of India took a revolutionary step by making Panchayati Raj Institutions a part of the Constitution. In this regard, panchayat raj institutions which give 33% reservation to women coupled with decentralized decision making have had mixed implications.

Women in Panchayati Raj System

The Indian Constitution provided Part 4, The Directive Principles of State Policy, Article 40 for the setting up of village panchayats. But this is non-justifiable. Political participation and grassroots democracy have been strengthened considerably by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment (1992- 1993), that have created new democratic institutions for local governance. It provides reservation for women in Panchayati Raj system set up two ways:

(i) for the office of the members and

(ii) for that of the chairperson.

With the advent of this Act, India today has more than 500 district panchayats, around 5,100 block panchayats and more than 2,25,000 village panchayats, approximately 90 municipal corporations,1,500 municipal councils, and 1,800 Nagar panchayats. And there are also 6, 81, 258 women elected to Gram Panchayats:37, 109 women to Panchayat at the intermediate level and 3153 women Panchayat at the district level. Role of PRI institutions in women empowerment can be highlighted by many aspects. Like:

(i) Women are taking up the challenge and gearing themselves up to enter politics at the lower level in the spirit of self-governance as committed Citizens.

(ii) Through the experience of the Indian Panchayat Raj Institutions, more than one million women have actively entered into the political life of India. Reservation for women in panchayats (chairman and members) up to one-third seats.

(iii) Women's issues have come to the forefront at the local level and consequently state and national level.

(iv) PRIs through women can work on the creation, development and promotion of Self Help groups, Cooperatives, MSMEs for better employment and livelihood options in Rural areas.

(v) Women leaders in the Panchayati Raj are transforming local governance by sensitizing the State to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

(vi) Through PRI, women are changing governance are evident in the issues they choose to tackle; water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence.

(vii)Women are also taking action against child marriage and child domestic labour, whilst promoting girl-child education. Also, women have used their elected authority to address quality health care as critical issues. If there is the good side of PRI in women empowerment, there is some slackness also. It was sad but not shocking to find that even the functions and duties of Gram Sabha are not known to a large majority of respondents.

About 80 per cent of women are not aware of rural development schemes like NREGS, GRY and funds received under these schemes. Dependence on their husbands and other male members of the family, low-

level of education, lack of interest, the inadequacy of training etc. appear to be the causes of women's low level of awareness. Women reservation has led only to formal and not real empowerment of women in the Panchayats. It is seen that the participation of the women shall have to get co-operation from their family members. Participation of women in preparing budget and plan is also not to the desired extent and it is dissatisfactory. It is only due to less weight age is given to the women due to patriarchal and male-dominated social system and age-old social taboos against women in the rural area.

Challenges faced by Women

Structural issues

Active women Sarpanches have given importance to social development activities like health, sanitation, old age pensions and welfare but a perusal of the agenda of Panchayat meetings across the country demonstrates a pattern of work priority being accorded to infrastructure issues such as the construction of roads and community buildings. Social sector development issues such as health and education take a back seat. Even discussion of the infrastructure issue is found to be limited to new constructions. Repair and maintenance of existing structures are often overlooked. An unfortunate observation that has emerged is, that most women elected heads are Sarpanches but still, they are dependants on others like, secretary, husband, children etc. due to lack of education. High monetary extortions from corrupt government officials and threats of physical violence, rape and abuse from the upper castes often keep them from performing their duties. Kamla Malaha, a Sarpanch from the village of Itma Teer in Satna district, lodged a complaint against the panchayat secretary that he is not performing his duties properly. Retribution was immediate. Secretary immediately catch the CEO and make all the blames on her but she fights for his suspension. Ultimately the matter deals with the court and in the meantime, the whole works of panchayat suffer.

Corrupted System

Many Panchayat institutions demonstrate a sufficient understanding of the constructive role that self-help groups (SHGs) and NGOs play and are able to configure a working relationship with them. With apathetic and corrupt administrations at the state and central levels, the tribal population is heavily dependent on the local nongovernmental organisation network as a representative and protector of their rights. In Satna district, for instance, the Gram Sudhar Samiti, an NGO serve almost as a parallel support. In many places of the districts the women groups successfully run SHGs. Still, there is an urgent need to work out mechanisms/systems that will allow the SHGs and the Panchayats to work in tandem and establish a system of reinforcing each other's work.

Social and cultural barriers

Unlike their male counterparts, female candidates are exposed to several barriers that may impact their desire to run for elected office. These barriers, are sex stereotyping, political socialization, lack of preparation for political activity, and balancing work and family.

Sex stereotyping

Sex stereotyping assumes that masculine and feminine traits are intertwined with leadership. Due to the aggressive and competitive nature of politics, the belief is that participation in elected office requires masculine traits. Hence, the bias levelled against women stems from the incorrect perception that femininity inherently produces weak leadership. Sex stereotyping is far from being a historical narrative. To be sure, the pressure is on women candidates (not men) to enhance their masculine traits in electoral campaigns for the purpose of wooing support from voters who identify with socially constructed gender roles.

Political Socialization

The concept of political socialization rests on the concept that, during childhood, women are introduced to socially constructed norms of politics. In other words, sex stereotyping begins at an early age. Therefore, this affects a child's political socialization. Generally, girls tend to see "politics as a male domain". Socialization agents can include family, school, higher education, mass media, and religion[6]. Each of these agents plays a pivotal role in either fostering a desire to enter politics, or dissuading one to do so. Newman and White suggest that women who run for political office have been "socialized toward an interest in and life in politics. Many female politicians report being born into political families with weak gender-role norms.

Balancing work and family

The work-life balance is invariably more difficult for women as they are generally expected by society to act as the primary caregivers for children, as well as for maintenance of the home. Due to the demands of work-life balance, it is assumed that women would choose to delay political aspirations until their children are older. Research has shown that new female politicians in Canada and the U.S. are older than their male counterparts. Conversely, a woman may choose to remain childless in order to seek political office. Institutional barriers may also pose as a hindrance for balancing a political career and family.

Efforts by Government to proliferate women's participation

One pertinent initiative made by the government includes increasing the reservation threshold from 30% to 50% women in parliament in decision making. Even though India has managed to legislate representation, it is only the first step in a long way ahead for women to be on par with men as decision makers. Representation alone is inadequate and until it is manifested as participation, it remains limited in its capacity to empower women in the public sphere.Government have also involved in implementing lot of schemes **Pradhan Mantri Mahila Shakti Kendra,** which will empower rural women through community participation to create an environment in which they realize their full potential. The Ministry of Women and Child Development also conducts **Training of Trainers of Elected Women Representatives of Panchayati Raj** to deliberate upon issues related to empowerment of women and functioning of PRIs; describe processes of participatory planning in local governance; and enable women to identify their own leadership potential to contribute effectively as change agents.

Suggestions

There are few suggestions for the better involvement of women in Panchayati Raj for the betterment of herself as well as society.

a) Women should be given education. Education will broaden their outlook and make them aware of their rights, duties and responsibilities in the society.

b) An important requirement for bringing about empowerment of rural women is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and bearing children needs to be replaced by a feeling of equal partnership between women and men.

c) Women should independently join politics so that they can have a voice in the nation building and can help the cause women in general.

d) There should be increased emphasis on ensuring the participation of women in the meetings of Panchayats at all the levels. This is needed to promote and enhance their leadership qualities and self-confidence. It will help them to perform better in the Panchayats to ensure their participation in the meetings. Attendance of all women must be made compulsory from Gram Panchayat to Zilla Parishad.

e) The Government should provide financial support and infrastructure to women's organizations and NGOs to take up the responsibility of encouraging the women elected representatives and arranging training programmes for improvement of political, social and economic knowledge.

f) Proper utilization of different government policy like National Literacy Mission and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for educating the rural men and women regarding the significance of Panchayati Raj and the empowerment of women. There should be chapters on Panchayati Raj and Women Empowerment in all the classes at the school level and compulsory questions are set on these in the examination.

g) The media, both print as well as electronic can play a vital role in restructuring the rural society. It can act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice.

Conclusion

PRIs can be the first step for political empowerment of women as the confidence and understanding of polity can allow them to participate in elections to state legislatures and Parliament paving the way from 'Panchayat to Parliament'. It is the only beginning of a journey towards empowerment. The journey of women leadership in local governance is not so long. Women are still in the learning phase. It is true that only women can effectively voice their pent-up feelings, requirement and perspective in development processes. Thus preparation of women is important to voice needs and ideas of this fraction of society in development. Women in India have made much progress in the past century, they are occupying the highest offices and position. At least we are ahead of America in that respect where to date there has been no women president. But there still a need for a proper solution to the many problems. The reservations at the local level and Women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions are not enough for the Women Empowerment. We have a long way to go, but we will get there someday. Swami Vivekananda had said" That nation which doesn't respect women will never become great now and nor will ever in future and in pursuit of making India a great nation, let us work towards giving women their much-deserved status.

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