

DIGITAL LITERACY IS A TOOL TO STRENGTHEN WOMEN SARPANCHES IN GAINING SELF-RELIANCE

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Introduction

Digital literacy which is a buzz word of the present Government, has its own significance in each and every field of development and the government has been taking various steps to provide the facilities of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to all people irrespective of class or gender and rural or urban . According to 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution women are given high priority in the elections of local self-government consequently their political participation has been increased. Unfortunately, it is observed that many women sarpanches who hold the responsible position have become powerless and inactive in decision making due to lack of communication and technical skills , which are the essential inputs for enhancing one's own capacities. As a result, they are depending upon their spouses even in performing their administrative duties as sarpanches. Digital literacy helps the sarpanches in maintaining records for various Schemes being implemented by the government such as health and nutrition programmes for women and child and education schemes which compel minimum education for all, functioning of rural health care services and local administrative services of the government officials. Since the main role of sarpanches is overall development of the village , they should participate actively in the teleconferences with the higher authorities and get adequate and timely support in implementing the Government schemes and programmes for the development of the village in general and welfare of the people in particular. Here are some research questions.

Research Questions

- 1) Are the women sarpanches performing their functions as per the guidelines of the Constitution and adopting the responsibilities according to the ordinances passed by the government from time to time .
- 2) Are they able to use digital technology in fulfilling their responsibilities and implementing government schemes / programmes.?

- 3) Are they trying to cope up with digital technology which helps them to reach the vision of the government?

In this context, the present paper mainly focuses on the need for digital literacy in enhancing the administrative skills of women sarpanches and tries to find out the ways for gaining digital literacy for their self-reliance.

AIM

The basic aim of the present paper is to analyze the usage of technology by women sarpanches in the administrative aspects and how far they are updating their knowledge especially in digital technology. The paper aims to highlight the significance of technology in achieving the political empowerment of women sarpanches .

Objectives and Methodology

The objectives of the present study are as follows.

- 1) To examine the provisions of 73rd amendment of the Indian constitution which encourages women to participate in local self government and
- 2) To understand the role of sarpanches in the development of villages and thereby promoting the welfare of the people.
- 3) To examine the participation of women sarpanches in local administration
- 4) To study the importance of Information and Communication Technology in rural development
- 5) To know about E-governance and to understand whether women sarpanches are digitally literate and whether they able to adopt E-governance.

Research Methodology

The present paper is mainly based on observation and interview method in order to assess the functioning of the village panchayats which are headed by the village sarpanches especially women sarpanches in India. Personal interview method was used to know whether woman sarpanches are having digitally literate or not. Secondary data pertaining to the government acts and amendments of the constitution of India was obtained from the journals, books, government reports and web sites. The present scenario of the progress of the villages and the activities of the village sarpanches are assessed through the observation method.

Need of the Study

Majority of the women sarpanches in India are technologically illiterates which causes political disempowerment. In the patriarchal society, the spouses of the women sarpanches are dominating

even in village politics, though they are not possessing power and authority. In these circumstances, the women sarpanches are playing only a nominal role and they are not having direct approach to the villagers and not involving in the village development activities. And they are not interest to participate in video conferences with the executive authorities due to lack of digital literacy. Hence there is a need to educate the women sarpanches to become technological literates which in turn helps them to become self-reliant.

Grama Sarpanches and rural administration

In India Grama panchayats are the basic units of local administration, which were formalized in 1992 by the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution. The development of the villages mainly vested in the hands of Village Sarpanches, who are the elected members and are generally considered as king or queen of their villages as they have supreme power and authority to develop the villages. It is the fact that, the village sarpanches are the main instruments, who can develop the conditions of the people as they have direct approach with the villagers and can assess the requirements for their development. The basic function of the sarpanches is to conduct 'Grama Sabhas' regularly which helps to identify the needs and requirements of the villagers and create awareness about government schemes and implement the welfare programmes. They also settles the disputes of the villagers with the help of other 'panchas'.. Sarpanches are the link between the state government and the people of the village. The most important function of the sarpanches is to obtain grants from the state government for the development of the village and make plan for the wellbeing of the villagers.

In addition to the regular functions of the sarpanches (Sec. 268), the government entrusted certain coordination functions to sarpanches with a view to strengthen and promote convergence of various government schemes in the field.(source:G.O.MS.No.791 dt.18.01.2013). According to the G.O , in pursuance of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India, 29 general powers and functions have been entrusted to the Panchayat Raj Institutions under sections 45, 161 and 192 of APPR Act 1994. As a part of the devolution of powers to Panchayat Raj Institutions, certain other functions have already been devolved to these institutions by the respective line departments.

The functions coordinated by the Sarpanch of the Grama Panchayat, other than the powers conferred under section 268 are as follows.

- Regular conduct of grama sabha and Grama Panchayat meetings. (sec.6 & sec.37)
- Oblization of Grama Panchayat accounts and other office records (sec.266)
- Levy and collection of taxes, charges, fees and other non-tax resources and adoption of innovation measures for additional resource oblization within grama panchayat. (sec.60).
- Registration of births and deaths in the village (sec.45)
- Preparation and implementation of village development plan. (sec.45)

- Provision of civic amenities (sec.45) which includes access to safe and clean drinking water, functional individual sanitary latrines and open defecation free villages, cleaning of all drains and streets and other public places and establishing a sanitary system of waste disposal, provision of energy efficient street lighting in grama panchayats and maintenance of roads, buildings, play grounds, parks and markets etc.
- Provision of health (sec.46) which includes registration of pregnant women and ANM AWW their enrolment in Angan Wadi Centres (AWC), institutional deliveries, immunization of children, enrolment of lactating mothers and children in AWC and coverage under supplementary nutrition quality foods programme, coverage of eligible couples with family planning measures.
- Provision of education (sec.46) which includes enrolment of children in the age group 6-14 years, coverage under mid-day meals scheme, identification of all eligible students for admission into hostels and facilitating them to get admission, retention of children in the age group 6-14 years in schools and enrolment of 15 yrs. and above age group illiterates in Adult Education Centres and neo-literates in continuing education centres.
- Welfare and Development Activities (sec.46) includes timely distribution of all sanctioned pensions (old age pension, widow pension, pensions for physically challenged and other pensions and identification of eligible persons in grama sabha, registration of eligible people in different eligible schemes, identification of eligible youth for skill development activities under various schemes.
- And ensuring regular delivery of quality food grains to all the ration card holders as per their entitlements. adoption of improved methods of cultivation through demo plots with a view to improve productivity in agriculture/horticulture crops, provision of veterinary health care to all live stock in the grama panchayat and protection of the panchayat and government lands and plantation of trees in village common lands for community purpose.

All these duties are performed by the concerned officers like EO, AEE, PHC doctors, supervisors, MEOs, hostel wardens, MPDO, Tahsildars, forest officers who are coordinated by the Sarpanch of the Grama Panchayat. For this the sarpanches have to maintain records and monitor whether the villagers are getting benefit from the government schemes or not. They should follow e-governance which provides them up to date information and make the administration easier. It is here digital literacy is most essential to the sarpanches which enables them to create e-mails and communicate the higher authorities through emails. It also facilitates browsing which provides them lots of information through various government web sites. They can understand the successful stories of various grama panchayats functioning in other states or countries and take as a role model to develop their own villages.

ICT and Rural Development in India

Of the 1.2 billion people in India, about 69 percent live in rural India in about 650,000 villages, and approximately 72 percent of the rural workforce is engaged in agriculture (Census, 2011). As per the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC, 2011), a three-fourths of rural households earn less than Rs. 5,000 per month, while more than half are landless and only 10 percent have salaried jobs. Rural India lags behind urban areas in the development process. ICTs can play an instrumental role in bridging the information gap in rural India. Integration of ICT in rural development interventions will speed up the development process and fill the gaps between the educationally and technologically deprived and the prosperous in society. As most of the population in villages is engaged in agriculture, ICT is a helpful tool for them to get information about their village, blocks and districts, natural resources around them, agricultural practices to be employed, seasons and monsoons, market rates of different commodities, and about government schemes. (Richa Saxena 2017). Information and Communication Technology provide the people a new way of accessing information, new possibilities of communication with central and local government through electronic services viz., information services which include laws, parliamentary papers, political programmes, consultation documents and back ground information in decision making process and providing e-mail contact with politicians through Communication services and transaction services like referenda, elections, opinion polls petitions. E-governance facilitates communication between state, central and local bodies and also maintains communication with the public and improves delivery of services.

E-governance will be successful only when the administrators at grass root levels are able to use electronic communication with the executive authorities. They must be able to create and respond to the e-mails, so that the public needs and requirements can put forth to the top level administrators and prevents delay in decision making process. It also helps to clarify doubts and finding out lapses the administrators to know about government schemes and can see that the benefits reach to the needy people. ICT helps to clarify doubts or lapses in administration and fill up the gaps in three tier setup of Indian government. Letters and drafts to the officials and ministers can be sent through on line which helps to get immediate response.

The ways for the effective functioning of E-governance in local self-government through digital literacy

ICT provides the accurate information about the government administration at all levels and maintains the transparency in decision making policies of the government. The following are the ways to use digital technology in E-governance and thus make the rural administration more effective.

- Every village panchayat office must be connected to district and mandal offices through internet. So that the sarpanches may know the latest information relating to the schemes and its implementation and funds sanctioned and released by the government.

- Digitalization of records relating to each and every aspect gives the accurate information which encourages transparency in administration.
- Through Video conferences the sarpanches can bring the needs and problems of the village people directly to the government.
- Display of the employment notifications which are published in government websites is very helpful to the unemployed youth living in rural areas.
- By conducting online coaching to the unemployed in the panchayat offices encourages the aspirants to prepare for the competitive examinations.
- When the sarpanches take the initiation to show the religious programmes, pilgrim places websites to the old age people it would help them to lead a peaceful life.
- The sarpanches can take the initiation to involve the SHGs in Digital marketing while selling their products.
- The sarpanches can take steps to see that various categories of people are enrolled in various related schemes and see that the fruits must be reached to the needy people.
- ICT facilitates the usage of various APPs which create awareness and protect people even from natural calamities.

To conclude , in an era of technological revolution, digital literacy is essential to every individual especially to the administrators where the government has given much priority to the E-governance. The constitution of India provides the women, half of the seats in panchayat raj elections with a view to bring gender equality in political participation. At present there are about 3 million elected representatives at all levels of the panchayat, one-half of which are women. The fact is that majority of women in rural India are either illiterates or less educated. Due to illiteracy and lack of awareness about technical knowledge, the women sarpanches are depending on their spouses in administration. It was observed that even in official meetings, the spouses are occupying the place of women sarpanches and they are using their own discretion in village administration. And they are not interesting to participate in video conferences with the executive authorities due to lack of digital literacy. Women sarpanches are playing only a nominal role and they are not having direct approach to the villagers as well as the officials. When women sarpanches are technologically literates , they can do the village administration most efficiently by coordinating the executive authorities at all levels and assure that the benefits of various schemes must reach the needy people. They can actively participate in political affairs and understand the challenges being faced by the rural people and act as mediator between the central, state governments and the villagers. No doubt that, digital literacy is a tool to strengthen women sarpanches in gaining self-reliance.

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