



"Political Empowerment of Women and Panchayat Raj: multidimensional approach to empowerment of women"

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Abstract

multidimensional approach to empowerment of women

The status of women in India has been subject to great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low point of the mediaeval period, to the promotion of equal right by many reforms, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices in India including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Leader of the Opposition. people believe that in ancient India women enjoyed equal status with men in all aspect of life. Indian women's position in society further deteriorated during the the medieval period, when sati, child, marriages and a ban on remarriage by widows become part of social life in some communities in india. During the British raj many reforms such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyoti Rao Phule, Swami Dayanand Saraswati etc. Fought for the betterment of women. Mahatma Gandhi also worked for women's upliftment during 20 century.

“Woman is the builder of nation's destiny. Though delicate and soft as lily, she has a heart, far stronger and bolder than of man. She is the supreme inspiration of man's onward march”.

In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. In fact the status, employment and work performed by women in society is the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social, economic or political progress of a country will be stagnated. The fact is that most of the women's domestic role is combined with economic activities and utilization of their skill and labour to earn extra income for the family, which makes the family to lead a decent life. Women are regarded as the “better half” of the society and at par with the men. Efforts are being made to realize that women are real “better half” in men's life. They share abundant responsibility and perform a wide spectrum of duties in running the family, handling the house hold activities like rearing, feeding,

attending to farm labour, tending domestic animals and the like, and the most important role now women need to perform more responsibly is her active participation in politics. Political empowerment of women should be one of her prime priorities and the governments and the society must contribute steps in that way to make women participate in the political arena. For that, participation in local self- governments provides initial steps as they are closer to the rural folk. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. Panchayati Raj Institutions that work as grass-root units of decentralized democratic self-government have been considered as an instrument of socio-economic transformation in rural India. At the local level the 73rd Constitutional Amendment act of 1992 has made two important provisions for the involvement of women in decision making and preparation of plan for development. This Amendment has made a provision that at least one-third of women would be members and chair persons of Panchayats. Involvement of people at the grass-roots level is the most important means of bringing about socio-economic development. Decentralization of power to the Panchayati is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision-making process. Local governments being closer to the people can be more responsive to local needs and can make better use of resources. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, to achieve this objective, a system of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayati Raj has been introduced in India.

Panchayati Raj was easily accepted because it meant administration by mutual consultation, consent and consensus. It fitted closely into the ancient cultural patterns in India. The adoption of the 73rd amendment by the Parliament in 1992 had a great revolutionary potential to create genuine democracy at the grassroots village level. It represented a historic opportunity to change the face of rural India. The amendment mandates that resources, responsibility and decision making power be devolved from central Government to rural grassroots people through Panchayati Raj Institutions. Their main objective was to realize Mahatma Gandhi's dream of reaching power to the people through Panchayats. Philosophically, Panchayati Raj is a multidimensional idea. It has its pluralistic definitions and wider connotations in the writings of different thinkers. Emphasizing the ideology of Panchayati Raj Gandhi viewed, "India lives in her village. Independence must begin at the bottom, thus making every village a republic or Panchayati, enjoying full powers". He particularly envisaged and envisioned the concept of Gram Swaraj along with Poorna Swaraj.

Gandhiji had aptly remarked that independence must begin at the bottom. And it is to emphasise that women's empowerment should also start from the villages, the grass-root level units.

Political Empowerment of Women:

Empowerment of women in all spheres and in particular the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the goals of equality, development and peace. The Indian democracy which is more than half a century old has entered the next century. But a large mass of women are kept out of political arena still. There can be no true democracy, or no true people's participation in governance and development without equal and proportional participation of men and women at different levels of decision making. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women. A general acuity in societies around the world is that women's major role is to cook food, take care of the children and the household. Different societies have different social norms and values. In some societies both men and women are assigned specific roles and duties. In most of developing countries, only the reproductive role of women is recognized. Under such circumstances, it is

not possible for women to participate in the public sphere of life. Cultural factors therefore offer constraint to women participation in politics. Institutional factors may also impact women's political participation. Electoral system with more seats per district and proportional formula for allocating seats can enhance women's participation. Quota system is another important institutional device that can guarantee a minimum number of women seats-holders in legislature. Women are changing the governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in an unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the constitution that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments or Panchayati Raj Institution System (PRI). The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in one village, or a larger area such as 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994, and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of the government. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. The percentages of women at various levels of political activity have shifted dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from 4-5 percent before to 25-40 percent after. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience in the governance of civic society. In this way they are making the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of the country, directly or through the freely chosen representatives. A proper representation of women in political affairs will ensure their views and needs reflected in public policies that affect their lives most. Political empowerment can be defined 'as the capacity to influence decision making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system'. It implies political participation which includes right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment'. Political empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. Political empowerment denotes a distinct role for women in the formation of policies and influencing decision-making process by integrating them into the political system. Indian women have had little representation in institutional politics since independence. There was more concern in the last two decades towards increasing women's participation in political institutions thereby leading to empowerment. Affirmative action has been accepted as a means to political empowerment. Leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance.

Women and Panchayati Raj:

Political Empowerment of women starts with the active participation of women in political institutions. The grass-root level democracy entails due importance to initial participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Even though in today's political system where some reservations have been provided to women in local bodies, that has been misused by some i.e. women have been used as rubber-stamps. Actual decision are being taken by their male family members. Women may have stormed the male bastion under the Panchayati Raj system, but in many cases it is the husbands or male members of their families calling their shots. Elected women representatives have reportedly been reduced to proxies of their male relatives. Such system of de facto rule by male counterparts have to be checked and due importance has to be given to women in PRIs. Political system and decision making process is seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution. The objective of bringing improvement

in the socio-economic condition of women could be successful only by taking suitable initiatives and measures for empowering them. Empowerment of women will not be possible unless they are provided proper representation in the political system. This objective should be achieved at desired level through making the provision of linking and associating maximum number of women in political affairs even at the lowest level of political activity. In recently introduced Panchayati Raj Institutions, the policy for reservation in favour of women has therefore, been thought as an important approach to maximize their participation in the local level.

Political system and decision making process in the activities of rural area.

Under the 73rd amendment of constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution, one third of the total seats for scheduled caste, backward class, scheduled tribes and general caste women members in Grampradhan of village Panchayat, Block Panchayat, District Panchayat are reserved for women candidate. Conceptually, providing representation to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions could be accepted as an important planning approach regarding minimizing the traditional felling of people about the status of women in our society, particularly in terms of keeping women under the subjugation of men, imposing restrictions by the households and society against them in the availing of certain opportunities and several other social, cultural and traditional bindings disfavouring them for improving personal life style and status in existing social and economic setting. Consequently this newly introduced policy would enhance the possibilities of increasing equalities in the process of socio-economic development, participation in different activities in mutual understandings, status and role to play in the house hold and the activities performed outside households and different decision making processes of the family among men and women. Factors such as the attitude and intention of elected women towards the initiation of various development programmes and capacity in making efforts in linking different segments of village population with the introduced programmes also matter very much in improving the status of women representatives in the social environment of the village Panchayats. As a consequence this process would lead to increase and strength of empowerment of women.

Initiatives for active participation of women in PRIs:

Following initiatives and training programmes ion making power of women even at the grass root level of governance and enhance their number in the PRIs

§ Measures have to be adopted to enhance the participation of women in governance in higher numbers.

§ The elected leaders of these institutions need to be at least literate, so that they could guide and tell the villagers about the various provisions of the PR-Act.

§ Literacy plays an important role in educating rural women and helps to detail about system of governance. Hence, steps to improve female literacy particularly in rural areas is the need of the hour.

§ Need to develop women's leadership and communication skills for enhancing social mobilization.

§ Essentially, to train them, find ways and means to interface with other layers of local self-governance within the state and claim the Panchayat's entitlements.

§ Familiarize them with the rural/women/child development programmes of state and central governments.

§ There should not be any factions and party politics in terms of planning i.e. selection and location of schemes rather genuine implementation of the projects are necessary for strengthening the decentralized planning.

§ To empower them to identify and break cultural barriers and improve their socio-economic condition.

§ Systematic awareness is needed for enhancing rural women's capacity to take up their new responsibilities as local legislators.

§ Besides, literature related to the various provisions of rural development should be provide to the panchayati leaders as well as to the common villagers so that they will be more acquainted with their functions and various developmental schemes. Further, all the guidelines of rural development programmes should be made available to panchayati leaders and common villagers.

§ The women panchayati members should be trained based on their local experience and elicit their involvement in preparing a framework that will enable them to analyse and understand their roles and responsibilities in accordance with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

§ In the ongoing e-Era, a broad and wide scope of importance has to be given to technology while making women empowered in all fields with due importance to political field. In the context of Digital India, women representative of PRIs should also be actively involved in utilizing the technology for their own self and village development.

Conclusion:

With the establishment of PRIs in our country a woman gets an opportunity to prove her worth as a good administrator, decision-maker or a good leader. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a milestone in this regard. It provides women a chance to come forward. This experiment is proving to be a big success particularly by providing opportunity to women to come out of their houses and participate in administrative and political field. It has to be considered that the inclusion of well qualified women in village Panchayati at the initial state of the interlocation of Panchayati Raj Institution in rural areas would be an important instrumental measure in planning for improving social status and empowering women. Women constitute half of the population of our country. It is our duty to encourage the women in such a largest democracy of the world. To give a proper status to the women, Government, NGOs, and Universities have to play a vital role in this field. This group of women, if provided representation at village Panchayati level can strongly rise and handle the issues related to the betterment of women, can play dominant role in decision making process and make suitable recommendation for improving the status of women in the meeting. It creates opportunities for women to exercise more control over design and provisions of services and the management of resources it may benefit. Good number of women competing with the men in local politics, forwarding gender related agendas is looked as a way towards the gender equity.