

Panchayat Raj and Women Empowerment

Meenakshi B

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science
Government First Grade College, Hirekerur, Haveri, Karnataka, India
psmeenakshib@gmail.com

Abstract: *Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) are viewed as solution to all the problems of rural development and is linked to empowerment of the marginalized section of society, especially women. This paper presents a thematic review on the empowerment of women representatives in PRIs with reference to decentralisation process and the 73rd constitutional amendment in India covering the level of awareness among representatives about panchayat functioning, capacity to take self-decision, participation in community activities, changes in their socio-economic conditions, decision making power at panchayat level and their political participation. The participation of women representatives including members from weaker sections appears to have increased substantially over the years mainly on account of affirmative action. Various studies indicate that women leaders are less corrupt, are able to provide more public goods of equal quality at effective price and consider women's preferences to improve overall governance. On the contrary, studies have also found that women representatives are illiterate; depend on husbands and male officials, especially in taking decisions with regard to village development programmes. The review suggests that the political journey is not smooth for women in a patriarchal and caste-ridden society on account of which women members face a lot of problems in the village panchayat. Women representatives are not comfortable to work at the panchayat level due to dominance of male representatives and they take a longer time to prove their capacity as compared to male representatives. Moreover, it was found that male representatives spend more time on political activities while, women spend more time in carrying out household chores. Overall, affirmative action through 73rd amendment has given women and the marginalised communities a sense of empowerment though they are yet to reach an equilibrium level. As assumed by many researchers, in the next decade or so the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women are bound to make further progress in their social status, leadership role, economic position, educational level and, political awareness and attainment.*

Keywords: Panchayat Raj

I. INTRODUCTION

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.

It is a vital precondition for every society’s overall growth. Even though women make up over half of the population, they are still oppressed and have uneven socioeconomic and political positions. For decades, women’s empowerment has been a hot topic in India and internationally. Women in India who are submissive to males must be empowered to overcome social, political, and economic inequality. Since India’s independence in 1947, there have been numerous initiatives to enhance women’s status. The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992 is a significant step forward in women’s political empowerment through Panchayati Raj institutions. As a result, a substantial number of women who were formerly homemakers have gained access to decision-making bodies in rural regions.

II. PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION

The Panchayati Raj institution is an Indian system of local self-government in rural areas. It was formed by state legislatures in all the states of India to help develop democracy at the grassroots level. It was created by the 73rd Amendment Act and is responsible for rural development.

2.1 Evolution of Panchayati Raj in India

The notion of Panchayati Raj was not new to India. From ancient times, Indian communities had Panchayats (five-person councils) with executive and judicial responsibilities and were responsible for resolving different issues (land distribution, tax collection, etc.) and conflicts that arose in the community.

1. The establishment of Panchayati Raj, its structure, and its organization was firstly recommended by the Balwantrai Mehta Committee in 1957. This Committee recommended the establishment of a three-tier system at the village, block, and district levels. On October 2, 1959, Rajasthan became the first state to implement Panchayati Raj, which began in Nagaur district.
2. After that, in December 1977, the Ashok Mehta Committee on Panchayati Raj was established. In August 1978, it issued a report with several suggestions to resuscitate and improve the country's ailing Panchayati Raj system. Its main recommendations were a two-tier panchayat system, frequent social audits, political party representation at all levels of panchayat elections, provisions for regular elections, reservation for SCs/STs in panchayats, and a Panchayati Raj Minister in the state council of ministers.
3. Later, the G V K Rao Committee, in 1985, again recommended adding some measures to strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions.
4. Just after a year, in 1986, L M Singhvi Committee recommended that the constitutional position of Panchayati Raj institutions were also discussed, as well as the constitutional requirements to guarantee that Panchayati Raj Bodies elections be held on a regular, free, and fair basis. Based on this recommendation, a Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha but it was not passed by the Rajya Sabha.
5. Following this, P V Narashima Rao's administration submitted a Bill in the Lok Sabha in September 1991 for this purpose, which became the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, and went into effect on April 24, 1993.

2.2 Constitutional Provisions Regarding Panchayati Raj

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment gave constitutional standing to self-government entities known as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), intending to make democracy more effective at the local level, driven by residents' demands and involvement. Economic growth, social justice, and the execution of Central and State Government Schemes, including the 29 topics specified in the Eleventh Schedule, have been assigned to Panchayats.

Part IX of the Indian Constitution establishes three tiers of Panchayats (only two levels in the event of States or Union Territories with populations under two million):

- Village-level Gram Panchayat,
- District Panchayats at the district level, and
- Intermediate Panchayats between Gram Panchayats and District Panchayats at the sub-district level.

It also establishes the Gram Sabha (a general assembly of registered voters who live in the Gram Panchayat's territory) as a venue for people's direct participation in local government.

The Indian Constitution established five-year periods for these Panchayats and provided for the reservation of seats for women and underprivileged groups of Indian society (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). Women's reservation is at least 33.33%, whereas the quota for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) is proportional to their population share. However, according to the information available with the Ministry, 20 states, including Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal, have made provisions of 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in their respective State Panchayati Raj Acts.

2.3 Areas not covered under Part IX

While Part IX of the Constitution applies to a greater part of the country, some places are exempted from Part IX according to Article 243M of the Constitution. The states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland, and regions covered by the Sixth Schedule, the hill parts of Manipur, and district level Panchayats in Darjeeling's hill districts, are among them. In these locations, there exists a variety of grassroots local governing forms.

2.4 Position of Women in Panchayat Raj Institution

The 73rd constitutional Amendment Act, which took effect on April 24, 1993, and became part of the Constitution, has ushered in a quiet change in the country. It aided the admission of about one million women into public life when combined with the 74th Amendment. The initiatives taken by the Panchayati Raj institutions for the political empowerment of women are as follows:

1. Women are developing self-confidence and taking self-initiative to fight against discrimination.
2. Women are getting a platform to make their decisions.
3. Women are taking steps to come forward and educate other women about education, hygiene, alcohol abuse, etc.
4. Every year, the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) hosts conferences on Panchayati Raj and women's political, social, and economic empowerment. At these major gatherings, elected representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and members of NGOs, notable academicians, social workers, government officials, and media personalities from throughout India attend. The ISS 1995 conference focused on the issues that Panchayats face, with a specific focus on the issues that women members and office bearers face. The participants were completely in agreement on the actions that needed to be done to enhance the system so that women can play their intended role in establishing self-reliant, wealthy communities and, as a result, a lively and thriving society.
5. Women are rising to the occasion and preparing to engage in politics at a grassroots level in the spirit of self-governance as devoted citizens.
6. More than one million women have actively participated in India's political life as a result of the Indian Panchayat Raj Institutions' experience. Up to one-third of seats in panchayats (chairman and members) are reserved for women.
7. Women are also working to end child marriage and child domestic labour, as well as promote female education. Furthermore, women have utilized their political power to address crucial concerns such as excellent health care.

2.5 Efforts by Government to Proliferate Women's Participation

The administration has taken several important steps, including raising the reservation level for women in parliament from 30% to 50%. Even though India has succeeded to legislate representation, it is merely the first step towards women being able to make decisions on par with males. To empower women in the public realm, representation alone is insufficient, and unless it is reflected as participation, it stays restricted.

The government has also been active in the implementation of several initiatives, including the Pradhan Mantri Mahila Shakti Kendra scheme, which aims to empower rural women via community involvement to create an environment where they may reach their full potential. Training of trainers of elected women representatives of Panchayati Raj is also conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development to discuss issues related to women's empowerment and the functioning of PRIs, describe participatory planning processes in local governance, and enable women to identify their leadership potential to contribute effectively as change agents.

2.6 Restructured Panchayati Raj Institutions

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has recently given its approval for restructuring Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA). The restructured scheme will have the following components:

1. The program would apply to all Indian states and union territories, as well as rural local government entities in non-Part IX regions where Panchayats do not exist.

2. The program will feature a central component – National level activities such as the “National Plan of Technical Assistance”, “Mission Mode Project on e-Panchayat”, and “Incentivization of Panchayats”, as well as a State Component – Panchayati Raj Institution (PRIs) Capacity Building”.
3. The Government of India will completely fund the central component. However, for all states except the North East and the hill states, the Centre: State financing structure for the state component will be 60:40, with a 90:10 allocation for the North East and the hill states. The Central share will be 100% for all Union Territories (UTs) (with and without legislatures).
4. The scheme’s implementation and monitoring would be mostly linked with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a focus on Panchayats designated under Mission Antyodaya and 115 Aspirational Districts selected by NITI Aayog.
5. The Scheme will bring together capacity-building programs from other ministries, with a special focus on ministries that will be significantly impacted by the Scheme.

2.7 Challenges faced by Women

A. 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.

B. 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.

C. 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.

D. Sex Stereotyping

Sex stereotyping assumes that masculine and feminine traits are intertwined with leadership[5]. 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.

E. 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.

F. 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.

III. 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.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Devaki Jain "Panchayat Raj: women changing governance," September 1996; www.sdnpu.org *Link is not available
- [2]. Sooryar Moorthy, and D. Renjini; "political participation of women: The case of women councillors in Kerala India," Journal of third world studies, spring 2000, www.findarticles.com.
- [3]. Kittilson, Miki C.; Fridkin, Kim. "Gender, candidate portrayals and election campaigns: a comparative perspective". *Politics and Gender* 4 (3): 2008, p.373.
- [4]. Newman, Jacquetta; White, Linda A. (2012). *Women, politics, and public policy: the political struggles of Canadian women*. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press. p. 101.
- [5]. Hilary Rodham Clinton, "Investment in Women and Children," Address at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation in New Delhi on March 29, *Span*, vol. XXXVI, No.4, April 1995, p.4.
- [6]. Madonna Jephi, "Lok Adalat : A new chapter to The Justice Dispensation System", [//lawtimesjournal.in/lok-adalat/](http://lawtimesjournal.in/lok-adalat/)