

Empowerment and Equality for Women through Panchayati Raj

Abstract

Women's population in the society is pegged around 49 per cent. They are doing wondrous tasks at all the horizontal and vertical levels in all the spheres. Even after their immense proficiency, efficiency and effectiveness they are negligibly included in the field of "politics". The obstacles namely social, physical and psychological factors pull back women from being the active participants of political background. It is notable that a democratic country cannot evolve and advance if energy of half of its population (the women) is directed towards kitchen only.

The Indian Constitution books gender equality via various rights, regulations and provisions. They created a belief that women would enjoy a status as good as that of men at all the stages including political one. We know that the parliamentary democracy follows the rule of majority. And if we would neglect the women population (almost half of the population), the nation would **not** walk towards its goals of justice, liberty and equality.

Equality and political involvement go hand in hand. By political involvement of women, we not only mean the right to vote, but also sharing of powers, making decisions/policies together etc. Therefore, women participation in politics is multi-fold. Firstly, it leads to women empowerment. Secondly, it ensures equality as per the supreme Constitution. Thirdly, it follows national advancement.

Keywords: Women's Population, Empowerment

Introduction

Active and smooth political functioning is the backbone of development of any nation; which must include people irrespective of gender. Panchayati Raj is not a contemporary concept in India. It relates back to history of more than 1000 years. It has its traces to the times of Ancient Indian Institutions when villages as the small republics were governed by the Panchayats. British are to be blamed for the destruction of these historical republics and association of women in politics.

From October 2nd, 1959 when the first Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) was inaugurated in April 24th, 1993 when the 73rd Amendment Act came into force, it has been an inexact and rolling ride for Panchayats. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA), 1992 says- "It provides reservations for women in PRIs set up in two ways; for the office of the members and for that of the chairpersons". As per the clause (2) and (3) of article 243(d), not less than one third of the seats meant for direct election of members at each tier of the Panchayats are to be reserved for the women.

On one hand, our Indian Constitution enshrines social justice irrespective of class, caste, color, creed, age and gender. On the other hand, lack of opportunity and following inequality is much ironic and sad.

Even the great Gandhi has regarded a woman fit as the Head of the State. Commenting on the Indian Independence Bill of 1947, Gandhi indicated his choice as follows: (Harijan, 15.6.1947 and also Ibid. 18.1.1948)

"If I have my way, I would put a suitable Harijan girl in the presidential chair. In a free India, Knowledge of English won't be necessary for the President. She need not have knowledge of high politics. All the learned statesmen of the country would help her to carry on the government...I would rejoice to think that we had a Mehtar (scheduled caste) girl of stout heart, incorruptible and of crystal like purity to be our first President. It is no vain dream."

Also, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making, including decision making in political process at all levels will be ensured for the achievements of the goals of Empowerment."

Kamalpreet Singh

Assistant Professor,
Deptt.of Political Science,
GHG Institute of Law for Women,
Sidhwan Khurd, Ludhiana

Objectives of the Study

1. To know the participation and involvement of women in the system of Panchayati Raj.
2. To understand the relation between women involvement in Panchayati Raj and nation's growth.
3. To ascertain the changes brought by the women members of Panchayats.
4. To study the role of women in Panchayati Raj System.
5. To analyze the working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions towards the welfare and empowerment of women in respective institutions.

Review of Literature

Here, an effort is made to review the earlier works related to the concerned study by other authors. Some of the important ones to be mentioned are:-

G. S. Mehta – participation of women in the Panchayathi Raj System Kanishka publishers, New Delhi, 2002, p. 150 discloses that the ratio of women members in Panchayats has very effectively experienced improvement in their status to some extent.

V. Prabhavathi – Perceptions, Motivations and performance of Women representatives Classical publishing company, New Delhi, 1991, p. 121- talks about the great pleasure and contentment that women members went through after being elected as the representatives in their respective Panchayats.

Bidyut Mohanty, Joy Roy and Smita Gupta- Women and Political empowerment- Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 1997, p. 53- speeches about the need of engaging women in the political system at all levels so as to legitimize our democracy.

Sangeetha Rurushothaman- The empowerment of women in India, Sage Publications New Delhi of women in India, 2003, p.34- states that the enormous literature on women and development are the mediums that help to analyze the social and economic status of women in PRS.

Dr. Vipin Kumar Singhal- Women Empowerment in India-Problems and Challenges, 2015, p. 54- explains the hurdles a woman has to go through to secure her place in the Panchayati Raj System in today's world.

Feats of Women Members of PRS

Women have continued through ages to put their best foot front in each field. From managing a home to settling a social dispute, women are amazingly successful. Political management has never been an exception to them. Here is the citation of some scenarios to assert the fact.

In Maharashtra, the women members of a Panchayat dug up the issue of potable drinking water and toilet facilities and are working continuously to combat the same. They are even dedicated to build playgrounds and schools for children on priority. Also, in some of the villages in Maharashtra, with all-women Panchayats, they have managed well the procuring of water taps and pipes and getting them repaired within 24 hours. In a village where no teacher was appointed to a school, 2 women came forward to visit the block

development office and got appointed a teacher for the same.

Orissa is another place of fruitful women Panchayats. A Gond tribal woman, Ramrati Bai when came into the charge as Sarpanch of the village Panchayat, battled hard and successfully for ensuring water supply, well-constructed roads, employment prospects and pension schemes. Additionally, she stood firm against social evils like dowry, child marriage and alcohol abuse in the Gram Sabha regardless of harsh resistance from the villagers. To ensure transparency, she was well prepared with all data, records and account books before the Panchayat. Due to her zest and sheer dedication she broke off the male supremacy and planted confidence in villagers regarding the competence of women in political field. She was the sole female contender against 6 male contenders in the elections and won them proudly (Gill, 2006:86).

It is observed that in many states, where women were elected to Panchayat bodies for the very first time either due to the reserved constituencies or because of being represented by their husbands in meetings, functions etc., they showcased a stronger will power when faced with the election for the second time.

To cite here is the case study of the Jagatsinghpur district of Orissa. Here, the woman Sarpanch who made Empowerment of Women in India through Panchayati Raj System put forward 563 logical arguments before the collector demanding more relief for the Panchayat after the Super Cyclone hit the area in 1999 (Satpathy, 2002).

Such is the success story of handful women in Panchayat. There is a long way to go if women are given more chances to use their power.

Productive Role of Women in Panchayats

As it is said again and again, women are good managers in all the fields. Their skills, passion and success rate cannot be underestimated. They stand parallel to men even in political arena.

Promotes Rural Development

Women are much active and robust when it comes to rural development. They are playing a great role from being labourers to policy- makers.

Active Decision Makers

Due to advent of reservation system, women are getting fair chances to attend meetings and have a say in decision making. Being the sufferers, they are in better position to suggest measures.

Mediums of Social Reforms

Women are well-aware of their rights today and are voicing against injustice anywhere. They are responsible for many social revolutions.

Contenders of Violence against Women and Dalits

The credit of decrease in violence against women especially in villages goes to the women Sarpanchs. Even, they have played an active role in eliminating violence against Dalits, thereby breaking the handcuffs of caste system.

Endorse Women Rights

In a male centric society, where women are often oppressed by the men, especially in villages, females due to illiteracy, unawareness and fear of

men are unable to exercise their rights. In such case, only women through Panchayats can foster women rights.

Practicing Participatory Democracy

Growing participation of marginalized section in general and women in specific has changed our democratic setup from representative democracy to participatory democracy.

There are umpteen roles that the woman Sarpanchs and members of Panchayats are playing with the aim of brining positive results, needed social changes and improving the status of marginalized sections in the society.

Problems in The Way of Women in PRS

Much gratitude to the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts of 1992 when the Panchayati Raj System was established in India which paved way for women in policy making via reservation. It helped in diminishing gender bias. It also helped women to hone their skills, reduce their illiteracy and to come out of 4 walls of their home to play an active role in revolutionizing society.

Dejectedly, women are being used as rubber-stamps. Even though women are elected but the actual power of decision making rests in the hands of their male partners. The Panchayati Raj Ministry lately got complaints that it is in reality the male members of elected women representatives in the rural bodies who are controlling the office. Hence, women are mere proxies in PRS at many places.

Following are the major challenges in way of women in PRS:-

1. Overwork pressure due to family responsibilities.
2. Low or no level of education among women specially elected in PRIs.
3. Lack of training courses especially for women representatives.
4. Lack of instilling of skills like communication and leadership skills.
5. Poor socio-economic background of women.
6. Patriarchal system which resultantly constraints their participation in PRS.
7. Pressure from male members of the family.
8. Political intervention in the functioning of Panchayats.
9. Criticism from public for having female leaders.
10. Therefore, reservation is not the solution. All other factors need to be dealt with more strict laws and actions to empower women of PRS.

Steps Taken by the Government

Government is highly responsible to bring along changes of socialistic nature. They are the mediators and main actors. The government has at times played a key role in changing the position of the women in the society by launching various schemes and programs to empower them.

1. In 1998, a scheme under the name of "Swashakti"- the Rural Women Development and Empowerment Project was initiated with the aim of empowering women in rural areas.
2. Further, in 2001, the government launched "Swayamsiddha" - the Integrated Women Empowerment Scheme that targets at holistic empowerment of women through awareness.

3. In 2002, "Swadhar" came into force in order to establish rural women economically strong. Under the Ninth Plan (1997-2002), 'Empowerment of Women' became one of the nine primary objectives of development among women.
4. India has proclaimed the New Millennium by pronouncing the year 2001 as Women's Empowerment Year.
5. The "Domestic Violence Act" will greatly aid and guide the rural women representatives who suffer from physical or psychological threats/ violence from male members of PRIs.
6. Maharashtra Government, in 2007 issued a circular directing all the (Panchayati Raj Institutions) PRIs in the state that lady office bearers shall perform their duties by themselves and nobody, not even their relatives should be allowed to intervene in their work in any manner. States and Union Territories have also been recommended to adopt and implement the same kind of actions to improve the status of women in PRS.

Solutions/Suggestions

Today, it is the dire need to give more power to rural women and the same can be done by giving more quality and quantity to women in rural political participation through PRIs and PRS. Following steps can be initiated in this direction:-

1. The first step is qualitative educational and training programs to rural women. Mahila Mandals can be established where women can gain the needed confidence, education and skills to be great contributors of PRS.
2. Media also plays an integral role to aware and to strengthen the status of rural women. The gap between village and government needs to be reduced. Media should highlight the effective role of women in PRIs, rights of women especially of rural background and should critically evaluate governmental and non-governmental steps to deal with problems of rural women.
3. The government (Ministry of Women and Child Development) should shoulder the duty to aware the rural women about their rights as well as their responsibilities. They must ensure fair and just system for women. Introducing and keeping a check on favorable schemes should be their prime function.
4. Women in rural areas through times have been made to feel inferior to men. Also, women coming from the sections of SCs, STs and OBCs find it very challenging and depressing to adjust with representatives of general categories. The former are often looked down upon by the latter. For this, it is the need of the hour to change the mentality of people. Any such attitude by anybody should be dealt with stern actions that promote or practice any such communal differences in any form, no matter how small.
5. Since childhood girls are taught to be confined and dependent upon the men i.e. father, brother, husband and even son. It is high time to change this notion. Women need to be liberated and be

made to be self-independent from early days of life. Their upbringing and schooling will do the needed task. They must be taught the concept of gender equality, self-respect, valor, individuality and freedom etc. which would improve their overall personalities too.

6. It is very important to change the thought process of the boys and men too. Even boys from early days and men at regular intervals should be taught not to disrespect women at any point of time and be taught the essence of gender equality.
7. There is also a need to build a forum for rural women to exchange ideas. The suggestion is that the elected women representatives of all three tiers should gather at a certain time and place to discuss and analyze pros and cons of any plan.
8. The general practice these days is that even the women MLAs and MPs often neglect the rural women of PRS. In fact the women MLAs and MPs should pay regular visits to the elected representatives of PRIs to deal with the problems faced by the rural women members. They should persuade them to take decisions independently and for the welfare of the weaker sections.
9. Motivation comes when one's work is well-acknowledged. This is a basic human tendency. Therefore, to encourage more rural women to come up, their commendable works shall be awarded and honored.
10. Empowerment largely depends on environmental forces. Thereby, we need to ensure a healthy environment if we want to empower our rural women.

Conclusion

With the introduction of PRIs and PRS in India, the women are now given the chance to showcase herself as a worthy administrator, reliable decision-maker and an inspiring leader. The 73rd

Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a pioneering provision in this direction. However, this has certain weak areas to work upon. Many loopholes have been invented by the opponents. It is the duty of the government to come forward sternly and provide for the same to create room for development of women through PRS. It can be done through financial, administrative, political and legal aid to women for the victory of the provision of the Amendment.

Also, we need to change our mindsets and learn that empowerment as a process might be of slow nature but it is also self-preserving. It is also on us to provide women with equal and fair chances, systems and regulations to ensure the spirit of Constitution as well as humanity.

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