

Women Empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions in India

Abstract

Panchayati Raj is the corner stone of the rural society. However, this ancient Indian system received a serious setback during colonial regimes, be it the Mughal or British. Even Independence could not do justice to this institution. Although Gandhiji staunchly advocated for Gram-Swaraj, Panchayats were made a subject of Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution, making it optional. This slowed down the deepening of grass root democracy in India and for too long the bulk of her rural population did not play a role commensurate to its size. Within the rural India, half of the population, the female gender played even lesser role, weighed down heavily by the patriarchal orientation of our villages. To remedy both the weak links, 73rd and 74th amendments were passed in 1993, which introduced the third tier of governance i.e. panchayats and municipalities, with one-third of seats reserved for women. In states like Bihar, Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh PRIS, women reservation is extended to fifty percent.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Gram Pradhans, Panchayati Raj-PRIs, Elected Women Representative - EWRs, Infrastructures, BIMARU states, Patriarchy, Violence against Women, Local Governance, Welfare State.

Introduction

In India, condition of women changed drastically from pre-independence, to post independence and finally progressed into feminist movements. The process has been a dynamic one, full of upheavals and contradictions. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, Ishwarchand Vidyasagar, Pandita Rama Bai had to struggle a lot to get 'Sati Pratha' and 'Bal Vivah' (child marriage) removed by the state. Widow remarriage bill was an even tougher task but it had to change due to strong will of our social reformers in cooperation with the then British rulers. Unfortunately, there are no social leaders today with enough sensitivity to U-turn the ghastly situation of rapes, molestation prevailing against the development of modern women.

Real women empowerment is, when women take ownership of their own lives as well as contribute actively towards enabling their children to build a healthy future for society at large. Reservation for women is a major enabler in this direction. future of children is intrinsically related with that of women their mothers. Fate of mothers is controlled by the ever-changing outlook of the Patriarchal society. Yes, position of women kept on changing from Vedic, to Epic, to Manusmriti, to medieval, to modern.

Aim of the Study

Unless the real power are delegated and transferred to the Panchayati system in form of participation of stakeholders, the dream of development cannot be achieved. People's commitment to their duties, responsibilities and accountability can be guaranteed only through the devolution of power to the people. PRIs are also the right tool to encourage participation of SC/ST, OBC and women who have so far remained on the periphery of urban area development. Panchayati Raj can benefit these communities like no other programme did before. The study of PRIs cuts across all the disciplines of politics, economics, sociology, science technology, health, agriculture, management etc. because it relates to the overall development of people and their institutions. Data and statistics from different domains are of immense importance to conduct the study in a holistic manner.

Twin Objectives of Feminist and Panchayati Movement

Although, world over the predicament of women is subject to internal, societal and religious norms which are culture specific, however, there is an universal factor which is common to all i.e. of child bearing and



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nurturing. In every civilization-Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam-child is regarded as the future of the mankind. Hence, the agreement that the children must be protected from the scourge of poverty, illiteracy, evils and inhumanness. It would be appropriate to compare the western Feminist movement with Panchayat Raj movement in India since 1992 onwards and the fourth International conference of women held at Beijing in 1995. Both these movements were dedicated to the upliftment of the grass-root women to secure the future of humankind. It emphasised upon the development of the fullest potential of each woman and inclusive development as against Liberal Feminism.

As is common knowledge, India adopted a democratic socialistic model under the 1st PM Jawaharlal Nehru. This approach necessitated the adoption of all those welfare measures on part of the state which the socialist countries had adopted for themselves. If we go by the list of activities of central Ministry of Welfare, we have such exhaustive list in the realm of social administration at the level of centre and state both that Rural India should have become smart cities by 1990s only.

But that was not the case. The objective of Act 38 and 39 of Indian constitution reiterates that, the state shall provide developmental services to children, women, youth, SC/ST categories in various fields, so that equity and full harmony could be established in the society. On the contrary, we see just the opposite condition prevailing in the country. Socio-eco- and educational condition of rural women is found to be very weak. Lack of basic facilities like roads, electricity, water, drainage, sewerage, family toilets forced women to defecate on the road side at midnights which resulted in the outrage of their modesty shamelessly by the anti-social elements of the society. Package of eve-teasing, molestation & rapes are the direct consequences of failures of the civic administration to deliver its constitutional promises. The message was cut across the country that administration was not supposed to fulfil its duty to citizens, instead it developed the boss culture. After fifty years of inefficient and corrupt functioning of the Indian administration, 73rd and 74th amendment passed by Rajiv Administration paved the way for political empowerment of the rural masses with 1/3rd reservation for women in PRIs so that women can take up their roles in the travesty of their lives. Women reservation Bill was a long awaited judgment which opened up a wide vista of development for marginal women. PRIs were those basic structures of Indian polity since ancient times that was lying dormant in the Indian psyche and given the opportunity picked up the speed very fast in the entire country.

Impact of PRI Elections in Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh also has been one of the forerunners of the Panchayati System, as it was the foremost state in adopting the system in 1947. In spite of the early adoption of the system, the state remained mired in poverty, crime and corruption for long. Originally a rich agricultural belt with the biggest population density in India, it was unfortunate that the state had to languish in infrastructure and technical backwardness earning for itself the derogatory branding of 'BIMARU' state for years.

However, in recent times things seem to be changing for the better; with the literacy rate going above 70%, the Gross State Domestic Product growing at a CAGR of 10.7 per cent and the tertiary sector growing the fastest at 12.7% CAGR, among the three sectors

from 2004-05 to 2014-15; industrial development becoming a reality in UP with creation of substantial infrastructure, and infant mortality rate improving from 67 per thousand to under 50 per thousand during the last five years; Uttar Pradesh is at the turn of momentous change. 33% women is one major factor, which can propel the state on the path of sustainable development. Further deepening and strengthening of grass root democracy can be ensured only in the hands of women as demonstrated through full utilization of Modi Government Schemes - Ujjwala Yojna, Swachhta Abhiyaan, Toilet Movement and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Abhiyaan.

In the context of UP, PRIs assume even greater significance because the state houses almost 19% of country's rural population as per 2011 Census. There is a long list of socio-economic development programmes planned by the government for the rural areas but even the most well-meaning welfare schemes fail because of implementation challenges. The last UP Panchayat polls held at the end of 2015 remarkable in the sense that it concerned seven lakhs Gram Panchayat members and 58,909 Gram Pradhans. Elections to Kshetra and Zilla Panchayats were also carried out successfully this year. In a big surprise, women had won nearly 44% of Pradhan seats in Panchayat polls across UP, challenging the fears of cast, creed, religious decide and male predominance. Those was an increase of 11% over the 33% seats reserved for women "the results are proof of women leaders are same to play a major role in future."

As per MoPR data (2016), there are 13.45 lakhs Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in PRIs, which constitute 46.14% of, total Elected Representatives (ERs). The top performing states include Jharkhand (59.18%) and Rajasthan (58.29%). Uttar Pradesh has 2,97,235 EWRs accounting for 41.36% of total ERs. It also has 19,992 Women Sarpanch. Thus UP still has to catch up with the national average. (*Check Appendix)

Women Participation in PRIs and its Impact

A good number of research materials are available on PRIs of different states like Rajasthan, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Karnataka etc., verified peoples' enthusiasm to participate in the political processes. According to Govt, data, we have 500 district panchayats, around 51 block Panchayats, more than 250,000 village Panchayats, about 90 municipal corporations, 500 municipal councils, 1800 Nagar Panchayats. Of these 7 lakhs women elected to Gram Panchayats, 38000 women to Panchayat at intermediate level and 3200 women at district level approximately. Traditionally, women are the backbone of rural economy especially farming. They work harder than men in sowing, transplanting, harvesting, winnowing, thrashing the crops. But their labour is not recognized officially. Thus rural economy degenerated, due to sheer negligence of crucial women resource. Not only as a primary care giver for family and communities, rural households are also being headed by women due to the increased migration of men to cities. A cursory look at some of the official organs of women and child welfare between 1965 to 1995 are –

1. Scheduled caste development.
2. Increase in the literacy rate of SC women of 48 districts of BIMARU states,
3. Augmenting National Commission for finance development schemes for sweepers with a capital investment of 200 crores.

4. Founding of National Commission for finance and development of SC/ST
5. Founding of Ambedkar Foundation for publication and publicity of Ambedkar's work and Literature
6. Welfare schemes for child nutrition in Tribal areas welfare of OBC, welfare of minorities and welfare of downtrodden through 20 point programme, these are just a few.

The output of such large scale, long term supportive schemes could not help the 42% BPL section till 1995. It was a twin effect of Globalisation, Feminist movement and PRI Bill, that women narrative started changing, such was the hope and expectation generated by Panchayati Bill that even social science graduates, MBAs and IAS/PCS officers got attracted to serve the rural India. There was no looking back ever-after that. Women have created history through Panchayati Raj. We need to tap the vast resource of Women Folk. PM Modi's initiative in this direction is laudable. His government gave practical wings to the constitutional status to village level councils. It is pertinent to note here that, the outcomes in the domains of health, education, women safety, children, nutrition and employment opportunities have been brighter with the involvement of women decision makers. As per EWR Report (MoPR 2009), 78% women representatives found an increase in self-confidence and 75% found an increase in shared family responsibility and decision-making roles. Slowly, even well educated women are starting to opt for the PRI roles. In fact, only women can project women related issues of water, fuel, fodder, sanitation and toilets as the core priorities. A United Nations Women Report points out that the number of drinking water projects in villages with Women Sarpanch was 62% higher than in those with men-led panchayats.

As pointed out earlier, better outcomes have been attained with women sarpanches at the helm of affairs or when women have been part of Panchayats in majority. The case studies of Chavvi Rawat, youngest Sarpanch of India or Arti Devi, who addressed a packed house of UN General Assembly on grassroots democracy are live examples of women – led successful narratives.

Participation in decision making processes had deluded India's women for long, but when they finally began to be included, research studies show social issues and related outcomes were handed better by women cohorts.

Current Challenges

Despite several states extending 50% reservation to women, gender-based discrimination is evident from reports, that elected women representatives act as mere figureheads or "Proxy Sarpanches", while real power lay with men of the house, more so in case of illiterate women. In many parts of India, especially in northern states, the husband performs duties of women pradhans and gram sabha members in lieu of women themselves. Well, it should not be a big source of problem, if government provides a training module on financial and computer literacy programmes by creating SHGs through micro economic programmes, dependence on mail will be soon over.

Similarly, non-cooperation of male members, lack of even basic facilities, viz. washrooms and toilets inherent in patriarchy often snowball into instances of humiliation and violence against women. The risk increases if women heads are seen as too assertive or

challenging the male ego status quo, many women Gram Pradhan candidates were threatened and murdered in Panchayat elections in UP.

A Parliamentary Committee Report (2002) on Empowerment of Women noted that it was the predominance of crime and violence against women and absence of training programmes for women that was largely responsible for the poor participation of women in Panchayats.

International Best Practices

Local self-government is a topic of great interest all over the world. Successful working of the local governments in South Korea, Canada and Japan, Sweden etc. are well recognized. Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, are few countries which saw substantial devolution of responsibilities and resources to elected local governments during the 1980s and 90s, around the same time when India brought in the Constitutional amendments. It would be worthwhile to make a comparative analysis with these similar emerging economies, during more or less the same time frame. There is no exaggerating the fact that, revival of PRIs and 33% reservation for women there in, is the direct outcome of the feminist struggle. The underrepresentation of women in governance and decision-making was found to be the maximum in India. The elite women were always visible, since freedom movement onwards. However, the visibility of lower and middle class women were seriously hampered, but in the west two major parameters of Millennium Development Goals - MDGs and Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs were made mandatory by the UN, to prioritize women's practical needs and issues at the top of the agenda of the local governments. Gender balanced local councils were initiated as a step forward to help attain gender balance at the national levels. Although, a standardised system to provide a comparative statistical evidence across all countries is missing, however a SDG indicator has been developed to provide a model of how to generate comparable data across countries. The model developed by the e-Discussions from February to March 8, 2018, in collaboration with iKNOW politics and its partners. Following are the input questions to member countries:

1. What are the challenges that hinder women's political participation at local governance?
2. What is the role of political parties in supporting women's engagement in local politics ?
3. Any support structure to help women elected at local level to become leaders at the national level?
4. What can local government do to achieve gender equality and empower rural women and girls?

Conclusion

I would summarize by endorsing Dr. Santosh Kumar Mishra's (Member PERC - population education resource center) view, that factors, that disable or enable women's political participation are class, race, ethnicity, cultural background and education. Apart from these, to my mind two more factors which surpass all above mentioned, are exorbitant cost of election and the deadly violence involved in the election process, are the most discouraging hurdles for women. Therefore, public opinion should be mobilized to cleanse the outdated mode of election and innovate the process as advised by PM Modi.

Appendix A**Status of representation of women in PRIs**

There are 13.45 lakhs Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in PRIs which constitute 46.14% of total Elected Representatives (ERs). The State-wise details are given below:-

S. No.	States/UTs	Elected Representatives	Elected Women Representatives	Elected Women Representatives (%)	Women Sarpanchs
1	Andhra Pradesh	156049	78025	50.00	6584
2	Arunachal Pradesh	9356	3094	33.07	
3	Assam	26844	13422	50.00	1093
4	Bihar	136325	70400	51.64	
5	Chhattisgarh	158776	87549	55.14	5822
6	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	136	47	34.56	11
7	Daman & Diu	97	28	28.87	
8	Goa	1559	514	32.97	79
9	Gujarat	132726	43670	32.90	4600
10	Haryana	68152	24876	36.50	2565
11	Himachal Pradesh	27832	13947	50.11	1631
12	Jammu and Kashmir	33282	11169	33.56	
13	Jharkhand	51327	30373	59.18	2284
14	Karnataka	95307	50892	53.40	3479
15	Kerala	19089	9897	51.85	494
16	Madhya Pradesh	396819	198409	50.00	11864
17	Maharashtra	203203	101466	49.93	13960
18	Manipur	1784	868	48.65	64
19	Odisha	100791	49697	49.31	
20	Punjab	97180	33609	34.58	
21	Rajasthan	121008	70531	58.29	5121
22	Sikkim	1099	549	49.95	88
23	Tamil Nadu	119399	39975	33.48	4289
24	Telangana	103468	46702	45.14	4600
25	Tripura	10939	3930	35.93	285
26	Uttar Pradesh	718667	297235	41.36	19992
27	Uttarakhand	61451	35537	57.83	4007
28	West Bengal	59296	29579	49.88	1657
	Total	2911961	1345990	46.14	94569

Note: Above details are based on information provided by States/UTs as on November 24, 2016

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