



WOMEN AND RURAL LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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Abstract

Political participation and awareness of women in rural local governments is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution, thus making the Panchayats as 'institutions of self- government'. The 73rd Amendments can be seen as landmark in the Indian Women's Movement as it secures 33% reservation of seats for the Indian rural women. However it needs to be kept in mind that the reservation in India has been introduced in a scenario marked by Illiteracy, Male dominance, Casteism Deep rooted cultural beliefs, Values which do not encourage women's assertion. In the society finally, the paper will look into the dynamism of the process whereby women Political participation and awareness is achieved through legislation or women participation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Panchayati Raj system has been playing an important role for development of the social economic and political life of the rural Women representation of rural politics. Village is the basic unit of social life in India. This is fact that more than three-fourth Indian population still lives in the villages. The concern of the government for the life, liberty and prosperity of the rural masses, soon after independence, was reflected in various measures adopted by it to better their lot. As a matter of fact, the prominent leader's freedom struggle such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Jai Prakash Narian indicated that the major task of Independent India would be to take democracy to the grass-roots level and to involve the rural masses in the task of national reconstruction. According to Mahatma Gandhi, true democracy could not worked by twenty men sitting at the Centre. It has to be worked out from below by the people of every village.

Key Words: Political Participation, Awareness, Women, Panchayats, Reservation, Empowerment, Local Governments, Equality, women participation.

I. Introduction

The Panchayath Raj system has been playing an important role for development of the social economic and political life of the rural people populace. Gaur reviewed numerous studies on Grama

panchayatsi Raj system in India covering variety of problems and topics on historical macro levels, regional level as well as almost on all general aspects of Grama panchayatss. He further reviewed both theoretical as well as empirical parts of the studies. He pointed out that in the present development context in India, rapid changes are taking place on the economic scene which brings in their trail for reaching changes in social, cultural, and political aspects of life Thus there is still need for micro studies which remain even green and having a bearing on policy issues.

Athreya, V.B & Bhargava, B .S. & Bhaskar, Manu, defines political participation as the verity of ways in which people try to influence the political process. He has sought to identify the channels through which citizens attempt to influence the leaders as well as to isolate the kinds of citizens apt to use these channels on a regular basis¹.

Village is the basic unit of social life in India. This is fact that more than three-fourth Indian population still lives in the villages. The concern of the government for the life, liberty and prosperity of the rural masses, soon after independence, was reflected in various measures adopted by it to better their lot. As a matter of fact, the prominent leaders of freedom struggle such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Jai Prakash Narian indicated that the major task of Independent India would be to take democracy to the grass-roots level and to involve the rural masses in the task of national reconstruction. According to Mahatma Gandhi, true democracy could not worked by twenty men sitting at the Centre. It has to be worked out from below by the people of every village. He envisaged the vision of self-sustained and self-sufficient village republics capable of managing their affairs. Similarly. Jai Prakash Narain, on the other hand expressed his view that fundamental bases of all political organizations in the country are the Grama panchayatsi Raj Institutions and that those bodies may exercise the widest possible authority to govern their affairs. His main theoretical concept was that the base level village assembly may be linked with the national level assembly through a system of direct election.

By observing the 73rd constitution amendment act, one can come to know about the main features of this act. Most of the provisions of the 73rd Amendment act are relevant in character. Such as involving the grama panchayatsh raj institution s in micro level (grass-roots) planning, regular election for grama panchayatss after expire of their term under supervision of the state election commissions, making the grama panchayatss raj institutions financially viable etc. Not only that this act protects the autonomy of the states for example forming of the low's relating the accounts and audit has been left in the hands of state legislature and power of appointment of finance commission to review the financial position of grama panchayatss and to recommended principles governing distribution of taxes and grants

¹ Athreya, V.B & Bhargava, B .S. & Bhaskar, Manu, 1992, *Women in Grassroots Democracy-A study of Kerala*, University of Kerala/ ICSSR, New Delhi.

in aid between states and grama panchayats raj bodies has been given to the state election commission. There all are considered as most welcome provisions of this Act. Apart from these, reservation scheme for the office of chairpersons of grama panchayats for the SC/ST and women is also very important provision of this Act.

II. PARTICIPATION OF ELECTED WOMEN

In the examination of the task of women in Grama panchayats, the dilemma is whether women should work merely for the problems and improvement of women or whether they would stand for the electorate comprising both women and others. Woman respondents commonly asserted that they were not in favor of exclusive women's issue or cause, they rather tired to work for collective interests of village. Regarding the preference in selectively beneficiaries for schemes/loans they reportedly acted on economic criteria of poor or caste as specified in the guidelines and not definitely into terms of familiarly /gender.

I have tried to see political participation as a process in which people try to affect the government by taking part in the voting behavior; by persuading others to vote;

Sushila Agrawal has written a book entitled "Status of Women" (1988). The constitutional provisions in India have been analyzed in the context of social reality and traditional value framework. Special provisions of Indian and criminal procedure codes for the protection of women who could be a victim of the offences in public and private life because of her sex have been examined.²

Vijay Kaushik and Bela Rani Sharma Said there has been worldwide awakening about the rights of women. The United Nations has been doing commendable work in this direction. There is more and more awareness about improving the working conditions of women and for providing them proper place in political field³ Political parties are keen to associate more and more women with their functioning. All these issues have been discussed in this book. Although governance is a generic term which could mean good government or management, the governance values, types of government, the nature of political processes, the political parties and organizations, which/whose interests are represented and protected, and the extent of power that the masses have to challenge the state or in suggesting alternatives in methods of governance etc. may vary in different political systems. Liberal democracy is founded on reason, law, and freedom of choice but the position of different social groups in the social and political space where power is located is not always equal in practice. This is particularly so in the case of women. The nature of society or state has a decisive impact on the extent and effectiveness of women's political presence and participation of rural politics.

² Sushila Agrawal, "Status of Women" Rawat publications, Jaipur (1988).

³ Vijay Kaushik and Bela Rani Sharma, "Women's Rights and World Development" (1998).

III. CONCLUSION

It is evident that men's attitude towards women's entry into politics has begun to change from that of total rejection to limited encouragement and in some cases even to active encouragement. This trend needs to be strengthened through orientation courses and training programmes for officials and elected representatives, both men and women. Besides there is a need to train the women leaders at regular intervals to enable them to manage the responsibilities assigned to them in the Grama panchayatss at all the levels. Since the hard up women members found it difficult to forgo their wages for attending training Programmes, these must be organized at their doorstep and some of the articulate Grama panchayats leaders should be involved as the trainers. Another important effort required for real empowerment of rural women is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and rearing children needs to be transformed into a feeling of equal partnership of women and men. To inculcate this they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both. Studies on women in politics have emphasized that contact with outside world makes women more alert and also active in the political process. There could be two ways of doing it. The women should also be encouraged to organize themselves. The Mahila Mandals in the village can be effectively used as instruments to mobilize them for this purpose. Incentives play a vital role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision-making. It has been noticed that there are certain very active and enlightened women leaders at all the levels of Grama panchayats, who have been successfully implementing the developmental schemes and have ensured overall development of their constituencies. Such leaders need to be encouraged by publicizing their leadership qualities and honoring them in public meetings. It will certainly encourage other women representatives and their success stories and good practices will get replicated. The media both print as well as electronic can play an important role in creating awareness in the rural society. It can act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice.

From India's point of view, we cannot expect an outstanding socio economic background in rural set up and demanding high expectation from them in a very short span of reform. Rather my study reveals that education and annual households are not at all affecting the development role of women leaders. The JRY work has been done wonderfully in the grama panchayats from not so educated agricultural background and politically inexperienced women. We cannot expect more morality from an educated fellow as now we are facing so much corruption at the high level. Another instance can be taken to prove my stand that the women Member of the Grama panchayats denied to open the Grama panchayats office and made logical argument before the collector demanding more relief for the Grama

panchayats. It certainly proves that they can do anything to the extent only acceptability as leaders is the need of the hour. So enormous expectations without attending a proper institutional frame work is certainly not a good trend perhaps, rather we have to be satisfied with this fact and figures for another few years.

So the present study disclosed for the women respondents, not elitist background, family obligation and domination not much determined. Education and occupation have no significant bearing on women's participation. Right from the attendance in the Grama panchayath raj meetings to their effort in JRY is up to the expectation. As such the study departs from the result of similar studies elsewhere. Some of the specific suggestions given by the members, both men and women for improving participation of women are as follows:

- Training on various aspects of the PRS should be provided to the women members. Provisions of the 73rd Amendment, writing records, conducting meetings, understanding of bureaucratic structure, government schemes for the rural poor, unemployed, education, public distribution system, etc. are some of the areas in which training could be given.
- Family and Government support. This was identified as an important area requiring attention. Encouragement by the families in the form of appreciation of their official work, their decisions and ensuring their presence in the meetings would help and similarly the government officials need to be more patient towards them and cooperate with them in their work and enabling them to understand their work.
- A minimum educational qualification criterion should be laid down for the future contestants, particularly the women contesting for the grama panchayats elections. This will facilitate the aspiring contestants to take education seriously from an early age. The importance of education in better administration cannot be denied.
- Compulsory attendance in the meetings.
- Creation of a feminist consciousness, which makes the women, identify with themselves and the characteristics so specific to them.

To conclude, the findings of the study are indicative of better participation from the women members in future. This will put them in better control of their lives, which is good for the development of the country.

To get objective information about the participation and performance of women member in Grama panchayats process I first intended to go through the preceding of Grama panchayaths meeting to identify and comprehend the real role played by each woman member in the decision making process of the Grama panchayats such as the nature of attendance in the meeting, types of opinion they expressed in the meeting

including their preferences and note of dissent if any. First, as to their attendance in the Grama panchayats Raj meeting, three women respondent could not make it and fifteen others are found regular. The official record for 1997-98 substantiated that women members and women Member took up the responsibility very seriously. Secondly, I have an idea about prior preparation of women respondents; it is found that twelve women members did not have any preceding preparation for any meeting. But other six, Members and nominee say that they consult local party leaders before going to any meeting. Thirdly, the nature of acceptance of women's point in Grama panchayats body meeting substantiate that they participated actively in the discussion and debate by way of what future action required to be taken up where more development works to be undertaken and funds be allocated. The total of twelve women categorically informs that their points/views raised in the meetings were not complied with while taking final decision. As women members' points were not always compiled with within meetings their reaction to such reputation would probably indicate the true nature and impact of their participation. It was found that twelve women members took refutation to their points in meetings without any form of protest or any pressure to take note of their views. Thus they may be classified as passive spectators who are unable to strike their entry to actual Grama panchayats decision-making. For the rest, their performance was not as shabby. They somehow reacted to the discontinuance of their views or remaining absent as a mark of protest. Fourthly, another indicator of ambition for role performance was tested. Of the total women respondents, 86% felt satisfied with their respective Grama panchayats roles and 57% expressed their readiness to contest next Grama panchayats Raj election. 43% declined to stand for next Grama panchayats Raj election. The main cause of departing Grama panchayats Raj institution was not because of their incapacity but for factors beyond their immediate control. Out of twenty-one, nine felt the apathy of other male colleagues and three fear of public criticism.

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