



PANCHAYATI RAJ IN INDIA : WOMEN AS A CHANGE AGENT

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"Discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family, and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity".



KEYWORDS: women violates , social, economic and cultural life .

INTRODUCTION

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979.

Panchayati Raj, one of the most important political innovations of independent India, is a channel for popular participation in the process of development. The first rural local institutions introduced in 1869 were small, quasi-official committees. However, inadequate financial resources and opposition from Provincial Governments obstructed the progress in local responsibility. Some of the British Viceroys tried to revive local government. Notable among them was Lord Ripon, who laid the foundation of modern local government in this country. Starting with the Ripon Resolutions of 1882 a series of legislations were passed in this country during the first half of the twentieth century, whose main aim was to democratize the local institutions. By the time India attained independence, the seeds for a fairly modern local government had been sown. The incorporation of Article 40, "the state shall take steps to organize Village Panchayats and endow them to function as units of self-governments", in the Constitution of India made the policy makers revive and strengthen the Panchayat Institutions. As a preferred condition, the rural development became a definite strategy for the improvement of the living conditions of the rural poor.

In 1952, the Government of India introduced Community Development Programme (CDP) to rural areas. The major objectives of this programme were to promote self help and self reliance among the rural people and to generate a process of integrated social, economic and cultural change with the ultimate aim of transforming social and economic life of villages. With many bottlenecks coming in the way of its functioning the CDP could not do much headway in fulfilling the aspirations of rural masses. However, it roused political consciousness among the rural masses. To give a fresh thought to the problems of rural development, government appointed the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), which recommended the creation of a 'three-tier system' of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to organise and manage the rural development activities. The committee gave motivation to the

constituent units of the Indian Union to enact necessary legislation to implement the Panchayati Raj System as a form of rural local self government. In this process, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first states to adopt the Panchayati Raj in 1959. Later, the then Janata Government at the Centre, committed to decentralization of power and authority, appointed a National Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions in 1977, headed by Ashok Mehta, which suggested a two-tier system. Consequently, the concept of Panchayati Raj received nation-wide publicity.

However, the above Committees which recommended on the creation and improvement of Panchayati Raj Institutions did not emphasize much on the role of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. So far, the participation of women in PRIs was so low that women could hardly influence the political process. Only one or two members were co-opted or nominated in a group of 15 to 19 members. It is disheartening to note that Panchayati Raj Institutions which were introduced in 1959, even now have not been able to accommodate or influence women to become members. In Karnataka things took a different turn and it became the first state of the country to introduce the policy of reservation for women in the PRIs.

It is a global experience that women play a marginal role in politics. Abraham Lincoln's concept of Democracy, 'Government of the people, by the people and for the people', is an ideal which remains unachieved in the world especially in the context of half of the population, the women. Indian population is made up of various groups organized around different issues such as religion, race, caste, ethnicity, language, region put the largest formation cutting across all these issues in gender based it is of women who form almost 50 percent of the total population. Women have been unable to create 'political space', for themselves. They have not been able even to project themselves as an important and viable 'Vote Bank' in most parts of country. The aspect of women's participation may include the factors such as women as voters, women as members of political parties, women as candidate, women's role as elected members of PRIs in decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation.

In the last few years, there has been considerable emphasis on political participation as the most important vehicle for the empowerment of women. The Beijing Conference in 1995 reiterated this issue in its 'Platform for Action' and urged the members from participating states to take up the issue of marginalization of women in political structures and processes in their own countries very seriously and devise ways and means to increase the 'visibility and space' for women in the democratic processes of their respective countries. An agenda was drawn up especially for political parties to create 'space' for women in their party structures because in a democratic government, parties are the main instrument for ensuring the entry of individuals in the government bodies. While things did improve, but the percentage of women participation in political process is still very low. The traditional norms regarding women's activities have been carried generation to generation unquestioningly. The thinking that political activities belong to the 'Public Sphere' and women by nature and inclination belong to the 'Private Sphere' has been harped on continuously and has socialized women to perceive 'Politics' as something 'alien' to their nature. The debate on the 'capabilities' of women, the 'doubts' existing in the Indian society related to the strength of women, definitely hinders the political empowerment of women. We have experienced several instances of turmoil, even violent outbursts against the passage of 33 percent Reservation Bill for women in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

However, if we believe in democracy, we have to accept that it can be viable only if the whole population is ensured access to its processes and structures. A democracy working with just 50 percent of the population can never be accepted as a strong and viable system of governance. Women have to be given access and space in the political arena and the issue of their training, awareness has to be taken up and tackled with great effort, gender sensitivity and sincerity.

When Mahatma Gandhi envisioned a truly independent and democratic India, he envisioned Gram Swaraj - village self rule. For Gandhi, true village autonomy meant that all adults - women and men work together to ensure their village's self reliance in, meeting basic needs. In a history of Panchayati Raj, April 23, 1993 is a landmark day. As on this day the institution of Panchayati Raj was accorded constitutional status through the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992, thereby seeking to transform Mahatma Gandhi's dream of Gram Swaraj into reality. One of the most important steps for

the empowerment of women and increasing their participation in decision making was taken by reserving 33% seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. This paved the way for election of around one million at the village, block and district level. The UPA government has made Panchayati Raj as one the pivots of the Common Minimum Programme. A full fledged Ministry Status was accorded to Panchayati Raj with the two key functions of economic development and social justice. The percentage of women at various levels of political activity has shifted dramatically as a result of 73rd Constitutional Amendment. The member of women representatives have increased. Here the question arises that could these women have entered in elected bodies without reservation of seats? It was the pressure of national law, combined with the political imperative of winning elections, that change political parties perception of women's limited capacity for public office. Women's entry in large number in local government arose from a mixture of political opportunism and an ethical sensibility that regarded the implications of gender as integral, rather than peripheral, to the creation of a more just society. Increasing the representation of women has not automatically let to a more gendered analysis of the issues confronting local government. Nor has it necessarily raised the profile of women's needs and interest in the policy agenda, particularly as surveys indicate that most of the women were elected just because of the reservation or because of the status of their husbands, fathers or some and that such women often act as proxies for men's view at the councils, being advised by their male relatives. Women still face hurdles to their involvement in politics such as apathy of political parties, inadequate education, the burden of reproductive and productive roles, lack of funds, excessive use of money and muscle power during elections, culture of violence during elections, corruption, the dominant role of patriarchy existing in Indian society etc.

There are also administrative hurdles to be overcome. The current administrative framework has a departmentally administered sectoral funding pattern which conflicts with the women led, area derived programme arising from PRI. There is a need to cut through the existing system of development finance to find more flexible approaches capable of responding to the new priorities that are being expressed. United Nations and other donor agencies funding for Central Government inadvertently supports this regressive national budgeting process.

These hurdles need to be removed and a more congenial socio-political environment conducive to women's meaningful presence and participation in politics has to be created in order to achieve democracy in true sense.

Fortunately, after the implementation of 73rd Constitutional Amendment, women in India has come up as a agents of change and they are making a difference. A mind set of cynicism pervades India portraying elected women representatives as puppets of men. Yet, study after study has shown that once women come into power, the overwhelming majority exercise power independently. However, as one woman elected through PRI has noted : "It is true we came through our men the first time and are often proxies for them, but we prove what it is about and will come on our own next time". Thus, the positive discrimination of PRI has initiated a momentum of change. Women's entry into local government in a large number, often more than required 33.3 percent, and their success in campaigning, including the defeat of male candidate, has shattered the myth that women are not fit for politics and they have no time to go for meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party process. Against all odds, women in Panchayati Raj are already making headway in areas of immediate concerns to their families and their villages.

The issues, often ignored by men, range from health to sanitation campaign against alcoholism and domestic violence are given priority by women. At the dawn of this new millennium, many of the entrenched social evils that have persisted for thousands of years are beginning to change. PRI has also highlighted the intersection between interests and social class, for its reservation of seats has enabled poor and marginalized women to demonstrate their deep political consciousness and interest in obtaining power. For them, politics and elections are very practical routes out of poverty and instruments of social change. Women are transforming the development agenda to address issues critical to village life. Women who often suffer from poor health throughout their lives, take a stand for better health facilities, nutrition and sanitation. They organize literacy facilities and tries their best for

access to education. Women form self help groups and credit organizations among themselves to increase family income. Women leaders organize skill development programmes for the women of the community. Women leaders take action against social evils such as dowry, child marriage, domestic violence, alcohol abuse and child labour. They ensure that women know their rights and have access to information. They commit themselves to include traditionally excluded groups - the landless, scheduled castes and tribes. Women are changing the nature and patterns of leadership, incorporating values such as honesty, patience, collective support, commitment, transparency and accountability. In even the most conservative villages, women's leadership unleashes a process of change for the whole community. Women leaders empower other women to step out of the home, become literate and contribute to the community. They help to dissolve old prejudices, creating new partnerships with men. Women's experience of PRI has transformed many of them. The elements of this transformation include empowerment, self confidence, political awareness and affirmation of identity. Women has gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials and, most of all, by challenging men. Women are also aware of their strength that it comes not only from their number, but also from their knowledge and skills, for example literacy. Thus women see training as an important part of their empowerment. Many NGOs have seized on this as a fundamental issue and have begun to focus on the training of women. Women's participation in politics challenge traditional ideas of male supremacy. Besides education, it is the grit and determination, which a woman has in plenty. There is a visible difference, a sense of excitement, in the women of rural India. PRIs has given many women a great understanding of the working of politics, in particular the importance of political parties. Some women's involvement in PRIs has helped them affirm their identity as women with particular and shared experiences. Women have opened up the possibility for politics to have not only new faces but a new equality.

Although the 'decentralization of government' has been misused politically to control from the centre through decentralized mechanisms, but the enormous expansion of women's representation in decentralized government structures has highlighted the advantages of proximity, namely the redress of grievance and the ability to mobilize struggle at a local level where it is most meaningful, for example, anti-arrack movement. It is easy to point out numerous examples of women who have worked entirely according to the guidance of their male counterparts. In some cases elected women remained at home while their husbands attended the panchayat meetings and carried out official transactions on their behalf. But it is true to a substantial extent, this is not the whole picture. When women succeed in overcoming heavy odds to achieve good results in Panchayats, it has an exemplary impact on a large number of other women. Women representatives must be encouraged through leadership training, literacy training and networking. Although, there are hurdles for women on the path of politics but women are beginning to change not only the issues and values of governance but are also adopting different methods to those of men. There is a call for society to become gender sensitive to provide justice with dignity to women. Margaret Alva, a leader in Indian politics has said, "We've just begun to involve fifty percent of the population. The forces of change are on the move. Women's confidence is building and there is no going back".

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