

Panchayati Raj Institutions and Empowerment of Women: Problems & Challenges

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Abstract: The paper, tracing the development of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) from Independence provisions relating to the reservations for the weaker sections and particularly women in the 73rd constitutional amendment. Various to the 73rd constitutional amendment of 1993, seeks to analyse and study the studies have been cited to understand to understand the impact of the constitutional amendment on the empowerment of women. It is true that reservation for women in PRIs have opened up huge vistas for their empowerment, particularly women belonging to the weaker sections. However, there are many challenges and issues. Entrenched patriarchal system and mindset, rigid caste divide and rampant caste discrimination in the rural society, massive female illiteracy and female dependence on male have ensured that, by and large, the real levers of power are still in the hands of males. Studies have been cited to show that some of the southern and western states are far more advanced than the northern and some of the eastern states. Bihar, otherwise not so impressive on other parameters, has provided for 50% reservation for women in PRIs and has given a huge impetus to their empowerment. The hurdles, as pointed above, need to be removed on an urgent basis if women are to be really empowered.

Keywords: Women, panchayati raj institution, empowerment, awareness, governance, knowledge.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Village is the basic unit of social life in rural India. More than three-fourths of the 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. A number of prominent leaders such as: Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Jai Prakash Narain, 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 be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It has to be worked out from below i.e., the people of every village. He envisaged self-sustained and self-sufficient village republics capable of managing their affairs.

The Constituent Assembly started discussion on the Draft Constitution for new India and the Drafting Committee set up by the Constituent Assembly released its report in February, 1948, but it gave no reference to the village panchayats. With the efforts of a number of leaders, particularly K. Santhanam and Shriman Narayan, panchayats did get a place in the Indian Constitution. The Article 40 of the Indian Constitution under the heading of "Directive Principles of State Policy" runs as follows: "The state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government".

In 1988, the Sarkaria Commission was set up to look into the working of Panchayati Raj Institutions and the basic question of center-state relations. The Commission recommended that the local self-institutions like Zila Parishads, Municipal Corporations should be significantly strengthened both financially and functionally. The Commission suggested that similar provisions should include. Panchayati Raj Institutions as found in Article 172 and 174, which made it compulsory for National Parliament or State Legislative Assembly to fix the duration for five years.

Uttar Pradesh took a lead in this direction and become the first state in India by adopting the Uttar Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act in 1947. The act was an attempt to develop the spirit of self-reliance and common endeavour

necessary for the prosperity of the masses. Following the recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), a three tier Panchayati Raj system was introduced by enacting Uttar Pradesh Kshetra Samiti and Zila Parishad Adhiniyam 1961. It provided for the other two tiers at the block-level known as Kshetra Samiti and District level known as Zila Parishad. Since then Panchayati Raj in the state has had a chequered history. As pointed out by Arun Kumar Singh and Ravi Kumar Pandey (1998). "It is true that from 1956 onwards the cause and evolution of Panchayati Raj suffered a setback, mainly due to setback suffered by community development itself. Certain calling off of enthusiasm on the part of political leaders and civil servants at higher levels was actuated by perceived threats to the respective power configuration from the merging Panchayati Raj leadership. Other reasons for its decline, therefore, were irregularities in the elections and suspension of upper tier. The elections to Panchayats were held in 1949, 1955, 1972, 1978, 1982 and 1988 respectively." The restoration of democracy in 1977 once again revived the hopes for the revitalization of decentralized governance in the wake of the recommendations of Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) for strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions. But these were ignored by the Government of India and the political leadership of most of the states as they had no faith in decentralized governance. However, these recommendations were implemented in a modified form in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal where the Panchayati Raj Institutions were strengthened and made effective. After the Ashok Mehta Committee followed by G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985), L.N. Singhvi Committee (1986) and Sarkaria Commission (1988) have been constituted to make PRIs more functional and effective. Since 1989 there also have been three serious attempts to accord constitutional status of PRIs. Unfortunately 64th (1989) and 74th (1990) Constitution Amendment Bill could not be translated into Act. There was an imperative need to enshrine the basic features of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the Constitution itself to provide them certainly, continuity, and strength. Accordingly, the 73rd Amendment Act 1992 came into force with effect from 24th April, 1993. It lays the foundation for a strong vibrant Panchayati Raj Institutions in the country. While retaining the three-tier system of Panchayati Raj, from the point of view of social justice, and political mobilization, the aim of this amendment include: (i) empowering weaker sections of the society, viz., Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes and women in local self-government through reservations in elective offices; (ii) strengthening the Gram Sabha for direct participation of the people in identifying their felt needs and fulfilling the same through panchayati raj institutions; (iii) providing a mechanism (State Finance Commission) to ensure the flow of funds to rural local bodies to enable them to discharge their functions and responsibilities; (iv) ensuring devolution of functions as mentioned in the 11th Schedule of the Constitution; and (v) providing for regular and timely elections to multi-level panchayat raj institutions through State Election Commission. Thus in fact, the Constitution 73rd amendment has become a landmark in the Constitutional History of India.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- a) To analyze factors responsible for success/failure related to political participation of the people specially women in Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- b) To examine the impact of Panchayati Raj Institutions on rural masses.
- c) To suggest measures for further strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions and empowerment of women.

III. VARIOUS APPROACHES

P.K. Kalhon (2004)¹ dealt with a study of women sarpanches in 20 villages from 10 blocks of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts of Punjab. On the basis of the study, it was found that majority of women representatives, particularly Jats, belonged to the family of ex-sarpanches or panches. This has strengthened the grip of existing rural elite. Even if they do not belong to well to do families (as it was in case of SC women sarpanches), the rural elite i.e. the ex-sarpanches of these villages were instrumental in getting them elected as village head. That is why they are acting as de-facto sarpanches. Being illiterate, they are totally dependent not only upon their husbands but also on formal sarpanches. S.N. Chaudhary (2004)² depicted that today due to reservation facility under the 73rd Constitutional amendment there are thousands of Dalit and Tribal leaders in panchayats at all the three levels. Some of them have done wonderful work. But many of them are the first generation entrant in politics, they are from lower socio-economic status and they are notionally capacitated to understand their rights and duties. Therefore, at the decision and action level many of them are dependent on others including the Panchayat Secretary. Sunita Dhate (2005)³ revealed that Constitutional provisions to increase workmen's participation in local governance would not act prove the panacea for every problems instead the move to increase women's participation in PRIs through Constitutional provisions must be accompanied by a movement to bring about an attitudinal change in our society, bureaucracy and state level politicians. It also needs to be accompanied by awareness campaign for women in general and SC women in particular to build the capacity and capability of the elected representatives so that they can play a meaningful role in the panchayats.

M. George (2007)⁴ emphasized that while analysing of cases in the study area, such incidences happened only when Dalits began to assert their political rights through Panchayat Institution. It is evident that the upper castes controlled the affairs of the village cannot tolerate the changes being brought about by the decentralized democratic institutions. In the backdrop of such incidences an array of question raises with reference to Panchayat Raj vis-à-vis Dalits. The initial prediction of decentralization envisioned through Panchayat Raj hasn't become a reality. C. Ram Reddy *et. al.* (2009)⁵ revealed that the process of emergence of backward caste women leaders is the same as in the case of men. The channels of emergence of rural leadership through caste, family status are widely operational even in the case of emergence of backward caste women leaders. Most of the women are from families with second and third generation of political participation therefore they must have had adequate political socialization. The empowerment of backward caste women is nothing significant except for women occupying positions of power. Yatindra Singh Sisodia (2011)⁶ revealed that it has been asserted that participation in gram sabha meetings has been low despite the people knowing about the inbuilt advantages of the gram swaraj model. Low participation can be mainly attributed to the strongly entrenched caste system class differentiations and gender divide in the villages. Sarpanch and other influential people dominate in decision-making process. There are primarily two prominent and sharply contrasting groups which practically lead most of the panchayats of the state viz. the group of traditionally influential representatives and the other group of novices as well as raw entrants.

Suvarna Ashok Benke (2011)⁷ emphasized that woman is the real shaper of the future in the sense that she guides the younger generation. What a child imbibes in its earliest year is a lasting influence, and the earliest period of a person's life is spent with the mother and other women of the family. Besides the maternal role, women have a very important role in society. The significant increase in women leaders has been facilitated by political, economic, and educational and status changes in our culture. Women leaders express the same general leadership qualities as men, but may have leadership styles particularly suited to today's needs.

Rinki Gaur (2012)⁸ emphasized a number of factors have been influencing Panchayati Raj Institutions in the study areas. These factors are: Press and mass media, democratic consciousness, welfare of the masses, participation in elections, education and panchayats, and rural banks. Satisfaction over the functioning of panchayats, voters and the other related factors such as: land, property and wealth, linkages with police and bureaucracy, majority of caste, groupism, religion, language, regionalism favoritism, nepotism, factionalism, affiliation of political leaders with different parties, socialization and politicization of rural masses.

Vikas Batra (2012)⁹ revealed one important point of suggestion is with regard to the shift from individual based income generation activities to group based activities, and the other is to identify and promote the members with entrepreneurial skills. Apart from this, experiments should be conducted with new livelihoods opportunities. This facilitates the group members over a period of time to diversify from a narrow choice of local skill and trade like livestock rearing and petty trading to more commercial activities. The future emphasis of the implementation agencies should be on group based income generation activities.

Aditya Kumar Patra and Arbinda Acharya (2012)¹⁰ dealt to adopt 'Principal Component Analysis' to compute index of women empowerment with respect to the role of women in household management and decision making power in the family. The index is formulated by combining various indicators pertaining to women's capacity in household management at the state level. This is a weighted method where the weights are the variances of successive principal components. WEI is computed for each of the states (except north eastern frontier states) and the national capital Delhi on the basis of caste line, i.e., for scheduled category' and 'general category' woman.

Nirmala Buch (2012)¹¹ emphasized that Gram Sabha has been described as the institution to direct democracy for participation of the local community in decisions on their concerns, programmes and projects, fixing priorities, selecting beneficiaries, receiving annual reports and accounts, approving the coming year's programmes, conducting social audit etc. But the enthusiasm of scholars and policy makers has not caught the imagination of the local citizens and the extent of participation has remained a matter of concern. Measures suggested and sometimes even implemented e.g., smaller size of Gram Sabha holding meetings in the ward/village as Paili Sabha, Ward Sabha appointing nodal officers to ensure that Gram Sabha meetings are conducted on the days/dates even quarter or six months fixed in different slates and even changed. R.L. Rasario (2012)¹² revealed that Panchayati Raj Institutions have great potential for promoting development of the masses. But this potential has not been fully exploited. Panchayats should be strengthened further and given functional, financial and administrative autonomy at different levels so that the elected representatives have full freedom to play their role effectively. Most of the SC women Panchayat leaders were facing the problem of noncooperation from officials and the dominant sections of Gram Panchayats. Gursharan Kaur *et. al.* (2012)¹³ concluded that there is no substantial impact of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act on marginal group and women. As per statutory requirements, now at least one third of total panches/sarpanches are SC/STs and women. But except few cases, their participation is limited to giving their

thumb expression/signature on official documents. So participation alone is not enough but the participation has to be effective. Effectiveness will come only when there is awareness. There is need to build the capacity and capability of the elected representative so that they can play meaningful role in panchayats.

Ritesh Nagpal (2013)¹⁴ depicted that the high proportion of female representatives very rarely met the Panchayati Raj officials related to their area. Major findings of the study are: (1) The high proportion of female representatives very rarely attended the general meetings of PRIs. (2) The high proportion of female representatives didn't attend the meetings as they were busy with the family work (3) The high proportion of female representatives very rarely raised issue in the meetings of PRIs. (4) The majority of female representatives (above 50.00 per cent) either always or very often addressed the grievances of people who approached them. (5) The majority of female representatives (above 50.00 per cent) depended on their husband or family members to help the people. (6) The high proportion of female representatives very rarely met the Panchayati Raj officials related to their area.

Amiya Kumar Mohapatra (2014)¹⁵ concluded that just creation of system, structure and institutions for better local self governance by providing autonomy through decentralization and participatory management at different levels is not enough rather to create a sustainable people centered and people powered environment in which all the communities can exercise their voices and choices and thereby can get involved in the decision making process for better inclusiveness. The three 'Fs', funds, functions, and functionaries are needed to optimally operate to enhance the desired benefits that can percolate among the masses. Thus, number of issues, dimensions and aspects related to panchayati raj institutions has been studied by various social scientists at all levels. Very few studies have been conducted related to panchayati raj institutions and another such studies by their very nature do not touch the core of reality. Therefore, in the present developmental context in India, rapid changes are taking place on the economic scene, which bring in their trail, far reaching changes in the social, cultural, and political aspects of life. Thus, on its own, the necessity of a new study remains evergreen.

IV. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PRIS

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has created space for women in political participation and decision making at grass roots level by reserving one-third of the seats all over the country. It provides reservations for women in PRIs in two ways; for the office of the members and for that of the chairpersons. As per clauses (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 women. Although the percentage of women at various levels of political activity has risen considerably, women are still under-represented in governance and decision-making process.

Table – 1 depicted that women in Gram Panchayats represented highest in Bihar (54.6 per cent), followed by Manipur (43.5 percent), Karnataka (43.0 per cent), Sikkim (39.9 per cent), Arunachal Pradesh (39.4 per cent), Dadara & Nagar Haveli (39.4 per cent), Assam (39.2 per cent), Himachal Pradesh (39.1 per cent) and least in Kerala (30.3 per cent). Women in Panchayat Samities represented highest in Bihar (49.1 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (37.5 per cent), Andaman & Nicobar Islands (37.3 per cent) and Pondicherry (37.0 per cent). Women at District Panchayats reported highest in Bihar (49.8 per cent) followed by Manipur (45.9 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (41.5 per cent), Goa (40.0 per cent), Sikkim (40.0 per cent), Rajasthan (37.4 per cent) and Karnataka (37.1 per cent). In Uttar Pradesh, the representation of women in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samities and District Panchayats was (38.8 per cent), (37.5 per cent) and (41.5 per cent) respectively. Further table revealed that the representation of women in Panchayati Raj at level has shown an increasing trend in many states. This shows the numerical rise of women in the political field. Before 1985 whereas only two women in each of the status of Gujarat, Punjab, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh participated in panchayats their representation after 2013 has increased to 33.0 per cent, 34.9 per cent, 38.4 per cent, 50.0 per cent and 50.5 per cent respectively.

The above analysis shows that representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institution has shown an increasing trend in quantitative terms. These achievements, however does not mean that rural women have no problems and are treated equally. Although there are many changes yet still certain socio-economic and political barriers are present which obstruct women towards performing their task and in participating actively in public life.

V. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

It was hoped that the constitutional status accorded to the PRIs would definitely check the status from tampering with the working of these institutions. This would also enable them to function as vibrant and viable rural local self-government institutions and acquire the capacity to learn, to respond, to change and to mobilize better participation of people in managing the local affairs. Under the process of political and administrative decentralization, the PRIs have to be instruments of decision-making with autonomy and administrative capabilities, ability for proper planning and sufficient resources for effective implementation. An overview of the existing

situation shows a wide gap between the theory and practice. It has been observed that mere holding of the elections of Panchayats and municipalities does not mean decentralization. They also require sufficient powers and resources. The financial position of the PRIs is also not so good. As a result, they are unable to implement properly and effectively the 29 items assigned to them. In such a situation, their development goals will remain only on paper. “If the size of funds is minimal in comparison to local requirements, it results in shortage of funds for large number of activities... Normally, PRIs have low level of internal funding as compared to their local requirements. They are mostly dependent on outside funds, which are in the form of grants distributed over a large number of PRIs and are quite insufficient to cater to the monumental task of strengthening local development base.¹⁹ No Doubt, some of the states have constituted their respective Finance Commissions but the recommendations given by them have mostly not been given practical shape due to lack of political commitment. The reservation of women and the other weaker sections in the PRIs has also not been able to bring about changes to the expected level. Male dominance, caste factor, poverty, illiteracy, cultural inhibitions, etc, are some of the reasons for the same. A study conducted in Karnataka by James Manor and Richard Crook for the Overseas Development Administration has rightly observed that despite reservation of seats for SCs and women, in practice males from the upper castes dominated discussions and decision-making. In some of the cases, even agendas of meeting are not served to them and some of them lack confidence in contributing as and when some important matters are discussed. Majority of state Acts have provided for representation to MLAs, MCAs and MPs in the Panchayats along with voting rights. It would lead to over-domination thereof. It is also contrary to the spirit of decentralization. In fact, in some of the States, the Gram Sabhas are not actively involved in planning, programming, implementation and review of rural development schemes. The voters do not take the Gram Sabha meetings seriously because of the lack of adequate powers and relevance of functions. There is a great need of creating awareness about the role and relevance of this institution so that real democratic value could be imbibed.

Table – 1 State wise number of Elected Representation of Women in Panchayats in 2009.

State/UTs	Gram Panchayat			Intermediate Panchayat			ZilaParishad			Representation at all levels as on 1 March, 2013		
	Total	Women	%	Total	Women	%	Total	Women	%	Total	Women (No.)	%
Andhra Pradesh	208291	68736	33.0	14617	4919	33.6	1095	364	33.2	254487	85154	33.5
Arumachal Pradesh	6485	2561	39.4	1639	577	35.2	136	45	33.0	9336	3889	41.6
Assam	22898	8977	39.2	2148	791	36.8	390	135	34.6	26844	9903	36.9
Bihar	117397	64152	54.6	11537	5671	49.1	1157	577	49.8	136130	68065	50.0
Chhattisgarh	157250	53045	33.7	2977	1005	33.7	321	109	33.9	158776	86538	54.5
Goa (b)	1509	514	34.0	0	NA	NA	50	20	40.0	1559	504	32.3
Gujarat	109209	36400	33.3	4161	1394	33.5	817	274	33.5	118751	39206	33.0
Haryana	66588	24406	36.6	2833	962	33.9	384	135	35.1	68152	24876	36.5
Himachal Pradesh	22654	8864	39.1	1676	596	35.5	251	92	36.6	27832	13947	50.1
Jammu & Kashmir	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Jharkhand	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	53207	31157	58.6
Karnataka	91402	39318	43.0	3683	1519	41.2	1005	373	37.1	95307	41577	43.6
Kerala	16139	4904	30.3	2004	609	30.3	339	119	35.1	19107	9907	51.9
Madhya Pradesh	388829	133508	34.3	6851	2378	34.7	836	310	37.0	393209	198459	50.5
Maharashtra	223857	74620	33.3	3922	1307	33.3	1961	654	33.3	203203	101466	49.9
Manipur (b)	1675	730	43.5	0	0	0	61	28	45.9	1723	836	48.5
Meghalaya (d)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Nagaland (d)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Orissa	85367	31121	36.4	6233	2208	35.4	854	301	35.2	100863	NA	50.0
Punjab	88132	30875	35.2	2622	866	33.0	209	68	32.5	84138	29389	34.9
Rajasthan	113710	40043	39.9	5257	2014	38.3	1008	377	37.4	109345	54673	50.0
Sikkim	891	356	39.9	0	0	0	95	38	40.0	1099	NA	50.0
Tamil Nadu	109308	36824	33.7	6524	2313	35.4	656	227	34.6	119399	41790	35.0
Tripura	5352	1852	34.6	299	106	35.4	82	28	34.1	5676	2044	36.0
Uttar Pradesh	703294	273229	38.8	65669	24674	37.4	2698	1122	41.5	773980	309511	40.0
Uttarakhand	53988	20319	37.6	3152	1079	34.2	360	119	33.0	61452	34494	56.1
West Bengal	49545	18150	36.6	8563	2953	34.5	720	248	34.4	51423	19762	38.4
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	759	261	34.4	67	25	37.3	30	10	33.3	NA	-	-
Chandigarh	162	53	32.7	15	6	40.0	10	3	30.0	NA	-	-
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	114	45	39.4	0	0	0	11	4	36.3	NA	-	-
Daman & Diu	77	30	38.9	00	0	0	20	7	35	NA	-	-
NCT of Delhi	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	-	-
Lakshadweep	85	32	37.6	0	0	0	25	9	36	NA	-	-
Pondicherry	913	330	36.1	108	40	37.0	NA	NA	NA	NA	-	-

Women: Combined SC, ST and General Categories.

Sources: Strengthening of Panchayats in India: Comparing Devolution across States, Empirical Assessment: 2012-13, Indian Institute of Public Administration and Ministry of Panchayati Raj website (http://www.iipa.org.in/upload/Panchayat_devolution_Index_Report_2012-13.pdf, Environment at Sub-National Level [2012], Ministry of Panchayati Raj and Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi).

VI. CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS

It concluded that the rural people are not at all conscious about democratic decentralization and political participation. After casting their votes in the Panchayat elections they forget their further duties and they are yet to learn to act as development participants in the PRIs and even they have been taught to think themselves as part and parcel of the grassroots governance. Study also found that the dominant male echelons connected with the PRIs manipulate some women representatives most of the times in their role performance. Hence, men manipulation to women leaders in their role performance virtually disrupts the vitality of women reservation. Therefore, party politics, specifically, the ruling party interference and dominance over the PRIs violate the very essence and philosophy of democratic decentralization and grassroots governance. Thus, it is clear that a number of factors have been influencing grass roots politics in the PRIs. These factors are: democratic consciousness, participation in elections, welfare of the masses, and satisfaction on the functioning of panchayats, education, rural banks, and voters. It is important to realize that representative participation may not lead to mass participation in our kind of socio-economic rural power structure. Changing this structure or at least strengthening the position of the poor against exploitation is an important requirement for the success of panchayati raj. The emerging scenario of the dynamics of development and the thrust on decentralized planning opened new vistas of development. In sum, institutional, structural, and functional contours of Panchayati Raj have to be in conformity not only with the accelerating pace of development but also with the developmental strategies and policies that have evolved over a period of time. In order, therefore, to make the system more effective and performance oriented the following suggestions are made: The Gram Sabhas should be fully involved in the plan formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the development works to be undertaken by the Gram Panchayats. The NGOs of repute may be assigned the job of creating awareness among the members of Gram Sabha. The presence of the women should also be ensured in particular. Since women for the first time have entered into Panchayati Raj politics at a large scale, proper training for them is highly essential. In this connection it may be recommended that for women representatives two types of training be given, i.e. one exclusively for them and another a combined one with their male counterparts.

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