
"CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIA THROUGH PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM IN INDIA"

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ABSTRACT

In India, a silent revolution has taken place in rural areas where people are becoming conscious of their rights. One-and-a-half decades after the introduction of the panchayati raj system at the grassroots level, it is now appropriate to take stock of the situation of women participation and empowerment in India. Generally, there have been contrasting responses to this phenomenon. One, an overwhelming reaction to the entry of women in panchayats, which many term as superficial, as most women are token heads, harassed in public sphere and hijacked by their male relatives; and the other, a positive response to their involvement and participation. Empowerment of women is not only an equity consideration; it is also a necessary precondition for sustainable social and economic development, involvement of women in the political arena and in the decision-making process”.

KEY WORDS: Grassroots democracy, Women empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in the village administration has brought about a tactical shift in the functioning of grassroots democracy. The changing situation in power structures has created opportunities for the Indian woman to take active part in Panchayati raj. Now, women are not restricted to home and hearth, but are entering into various fields and proving their capabilities. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 that grants 33% reservation for women in the panchayati raj have encouraged women to participate in their village development and plan for the future of their villages. More significantly, priorities at the village development level have changed health, child education, sanitation, socio-economic development for the better. Discussion in an open atmosphere and participation of women in the process of decision-making creates a sense and meaning to rural women. Yet, her position in the family is quite tense — combating oppressive forces, working as second fiddle in the public sphere and limited by the stereotypical attitude of a society dominated by males.

The origin of the panchayati raj system in India is not a sudden phenomenon but rather evolutionary in nature. Village panchayats, as the institution of self governance, have their roots in ancient India. In modern India, the institute of panchayati raj remained central to the thinking, understanding and action of Mahatma Gandhi who harnessed the age-old democratic grassroots tradition of India for liberating the country from British rule, regenerating her from centuries of political subjugation, social and economic retardation, and unchaining her potential. “India lives in villages” was Gandhiji’s life mantra— village administration remained at the heart of his vision for decentralizing power, uplifting more than half a million villages in which India lived, acquisition of capacity by common citizens for controlling the authority of the government and above all, for quickening the process of development so that the ordinary people were the country’s fountain-head and principal beneficiaries (Sahu, 2005:47). Panchayats in this sense constituted for him the basic building block of democracy and the means for the reconstruction of India from below. Focusing on panchayati raj, Mahatma Gandhi wrote on 18 May, 1947: “Democracy requires everyone, man or woman to realise his or her responsibility. This is what is meant by panchayati raj” (Sahu, 2005: 49). Jawaharlal Nehru, while signifying the role of traditional village panchayats narrates: “During the time of Rig Veda (1200B.C.), evidence suggests that self-government village bodies called ‘sabha’ existed. With the passage of time, these bodies became a panchayat (council of five persons). Panchayats were functional institutions with grass roots level governance in almost every village.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM

The ethics and trend of participatory aspect has been advocated in this article for vibration of universal trend of understanding in realism. The data and indicators in this article symbolise the phenomenon of growth and attributes in the sphere of political participation of women for holistic mindset and political stratification on the highest cohesive sense of the term and conditionality's.

Women's empowerment as a phenomenon is not something absolutely new. It has been there throughout history in almost all societies for a variety of reasons. What could be considered as new is its increasingly coming out in public, its having been shifted and reshaped from women's welfare and their development to now women's empowerment, and it is being discussed, reported and critically evaluated. What is rather recent is the identification of the girl children and women as a special group and the acknowledgement internationally of the importance of specific focus on the critical and key issues related with the empowerment of women. What is still more recent is the increasing realization and recognition that empowering women is absolutely essential rather imperative, for familial, societal, national and international development and progress. It has also been realized and accepted that genuine commitment and efforts have to be made by each country at the government, non-government and individual levels to work, towards establishing women's empowerment as nationality and internationally discussed also in UN World Conference on Women and agreed upon the Plan for Action.

The movement for gender equality the world over has been one of the defining developments of our time. While women have made significant advances in many societies, women's concerns are still given second priority almost everywhere. According to the Report of the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, Copenhagen, July 1980: "While Women represent 50 per cent of the world adult population and a-third of official labour force, they perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours, receive only a-tenth of world income and own less than one per cent of the world property". This is more than true of India. Despite development planning, and the special status accorded to women in the Indian Constitution, there has not been a substantial qualitative improvement in the position of a large majority of women living in rural areas.

EMPOWERMENT: CONCEPT

Empowerment has become a fashionable and buzz word. It essentially means decentralisation of authority and power. It aims at getting participation of deprived sections of people in decision-making process. In other words giving voice to voiceless. Activists want government to empower poor people including women by legislative measures and welfare programmes. Empowerment is the process by which the disempowered or powerless people can change their circumstances and begin to have control over their lives. It results in a change in the balance of power, in the living conditions and in the relationships. Unless capacity is built in these sections in reality the power is used by others rather than the section for which they are meant. Women empowerment may mean equal status to women, opportunity and freedom to develop herself. The focus of empowerment is equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive self esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in the process of decision-making.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The world over women are struggling to break the shackles that bind them and challenging the unequal distribution of power in society. Transforming the existing egalitarian pattern of gender relationships necessitates leadership in the state, markets and civil society—the key centres of power in the present globalising economy. It is, therefore, imperative for women to be in the corridors of power and have the power to negotiate a better deal for themselves, if they are to influence policy decisions which have an impact upon them. Empowerment of women in all spheres, in particular the political sphere is critical for their advancement and the foundation of a gender-equal society. Women's political empowerment is premised on "three fundamental and non-negotiable principles: (a) the equality between women and men; (b)

Women's right to the full development of their potentials; and (c) women's right to self representation and self-determination". In empowerment, the key indeed is 'power': it is power to 'access', 'control' and make 'informed choices'. To use an Indian expression, it is shakti, which is manifested through the use of a mix of power, effectiveness, capability, force and influence to challenge and transform the structures and institutions of patriarchal ideology and existing power relations. According to the Jakarta Declaration, "Empowerment of women is not only an equity consideration, it is also a necessary precondition for sustainable economic and social development. Involvement of women in the political arena and in decision-making roles is an important tool for empowerment as well as monitoring standards of political performance." The application of the philosophical underpinnings of Jakarta Declaration are necessary, because in the countries where women have gained near equal representation such as in the Scandinavian countries, they have begun to alter the very nature of politics.

GENDER JUSTICE

Judicial activism in recent years had led to ensuring greater equality for women before the law. Review of legislation from a gender perspective has begun to bring greater equality for women. Greater awareness among women; a stronger recognition of women's rights, sustained public advocacy and effective judicial activism are beginning to show some results. The Supreme Court's landmark judgement in 1997 on a writ petition by some women's groups seeking the enforcement of the fundamental rights of working women has paved the way for their greater protection from sexual harassment. The Supreme Court in 1997, also announced a set of guidelines for sexual harassment for the first time. Court judgments have also started invoking international conventions like CEDAW to make a stronger case for women's justice. Institutions like the National Commission for Women and the National Human Rights Commission are carrying out detailed investigations of injustice against women.

Women are, however virtually invisible in the political sphere. Under representation or invisibility of women in decision-making reinforces their deprivation, leading to an unequal distribution of resources, neglect of their interests, needs, perspectives and priorities and now say in policymaking. Their voices fall in deaf ears, and as Alida Brill vehemently insists, "Without our own voices being heard inside the government arenas and halls of public policy and debate, we are without the right of accountability—a basic entitlement of those who are governed".

THE ROAD TRAVELLED: FROM WELFARE TO EMPOWERMENT

In India numerous steps have been undertaken to provide constitutional safeguards and institutional framework for activities for women welfare. The development of women has been the central focus in development planning since Independence. There have been various shifts in policy approaches during the last 40 years from the concept of 'welfare' in the 70s to 'development' in the '80s, and now to 'empowerment' in the '90s and afterwards. Now the emphasis is on the inclusion of women in decision making and their participation at the policy formulation levels.

The Government of India has declared the year 2001 as year for the Empowerment of Women, but the struggle to reach this stage has been long and arduous. The concern for women's political equality in India first emerged as a political issue during the national movement in which women were active participants. As early as 1917, Indian women raised the issue of representation in politics, which at a time meant a demand for universal adult franchise. By 1929 women had the right to vote on the basis of wifehood, property and education. Under the Government of India Act, 1935, all women over 21 could vote provided they fulfilled the conditions of property and education. Post-Independence, women continued to play a significant role in less conventional political activities such as environmental movement, anti-alcohol agitation, peace movement and even revolutionary activities, which equally affect power relationships as they have the capacity to influence the state. Yet, politics proved to be a very inhospitable terrain for women and continues to be the male bastion into which the entry of women is severely restricted.

“Women continue to remain invisible and marginalised in decision making bodies, leading to lack of a feminist perspective in political decision making. It was only with the setting up of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) September, 1971 that the demand for greater representation of women in political institutions in India was taken up in a systematic way. Earlier the focus of the growing women’s movement had been on improving women’s socio-economic position. The CSWI Report “Towards Equality” (1974) reveals that political parties have “tended to see the women voters and citizens as appendages of the males.....”. It also refers to the ‘tokenism’ involved in having a few women’s rights on account of their dependent and minority status. Recognising the ‘tokenism’ inherent in associating women representative through election, co-option or nomination in local bodies, the report suggests a more meaningful role of women in the structure of local administration.

These amendments, as a strategy of affirmative action, served as a major breakthrough towards ensuring women’s equal access and increased participation in political power structures. Thus, women are making significant gains in the political sphere where increased participation is rapidly empowering women, boosting their confidence, changing perceptions regarding their contribution, and improving their status and position in society. For instance, political participation and grassroots democracy have been strengthened considerably by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments that have created new democratic institutions for local governance. The last 20 years of panchayati raj in India have seen women go from strength to strength in terms of their political participation. While many faced resistance initially to their presence in offices of responsibility, overtime, acceptance of women within the panchayati raj framework has been increasing. Of the 28 lakh elected Panchayat representatives, around 10 lakh are estimated to be women. The average of women representation in panchayats across the country is 36.94 per cent. However, a few states have gone beyond the mandated 33 per cent and provided more reservation for women. For instance Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan have reserved 50 per cent seats for women in panchayats and Sikkim has reserved 40 per cent seats for women. Roughly 55 per cent of elected representatives in Bihar are women. The Constitution’s 110th Amendment Bill 2009 provides reservation for women from 33 per cent to 50 per cent in PRIs. The Bill seeks to amend the Article 243D to enhance the quantum of reservation for women from one-third to one-half of the total seats in the panchayats. Similar reservation shall be provided among the total number of offices of chairpersons.

But the British rule in India destroyed the basic fabric of rural administration. Besides, the quest for panchayati raj system was getting a low response and the question of even getting the request from the local area for setting up village panchayats was limited to resident males. This reflects the prevalent ideology, which did not address the questions of female voters or female elected representatives (Buch, 2001:8). During the British period, the Franchise Committee set up by the British government which left the question of women’s franchise in India to provincial legislatures and linked it with the issue of local culture and sensitivity on the subject. In the first report on the bill for the Government of India Act, 1919, the Joint Selected Committee of the British Parliament endorsed the recommendation of the Franchise Committee on the subject of women’s franchise and said the “question whether women should or should not be admitted to the franchise on the same terms as men should be left to the newly elected legislative council of each province to settle by resolutions.” Hence, the Government of India Act, 1919, provided that if the legislative council in any province passed a resolution in favour of women’s franchise, they should be put in the electoral register of that province. The statutory rules made under the Act of 1919 did not make women eligible for appointment as members of the legislative councils (Buch, 2001:9). The law was modified later and powers given to the council to pass resolutions to allow qualified women to become members by election or nomination.

The question of women’s participation in panchayats in Independent India had merited the attention of the Committee on the Status of Sanjay Kumar Pradhan and Geetanjali Dutta Women in India (1974). The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) prioritised women representation in the panchayats.

Internationally, the Mexico Plan (1975) and the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985) influenced India to come out with a plan with a broad-based strategy to deal with women issues and women empowerment at the village level. The Nairobi Strategies called on participating countries to take steps for ensuring women's participation in politics through reservation of 35% seats in all elections (Datta, 2001:30).

WOMEN'S ISSUES IN PANCHAYATI RAJ POST-INDEPENDENCE

Gandhiji's dream of Swaraj in terms of well-being of people, grassroots democracy and empowerment of rural people in India was materialized with the mandatory introduction of panchayati raj system in states under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The inspiration for the introduction of 33% reservation for women in panchayati raj was the brain-child of Rajiv Gandhi. While delivering his inaugural address to the 13th All India Panchayati Parishad on September 22, 1986, Rajiv Gandhi said: "We cannot do from above what can be done with speed and vigour at the grassroots level. Thus, if we want to see India strong and united, the work of the panchayat is of paramount importance. Without it, the country cannot make progress" (Sahu, 2005:50).

After a prolonged deliberation, as a first step, the government made the provision in the Panchayat and Nagarpalika Bill of 1992 to reserve 33% of candidature and constituencies in local bodi-panchayats, municipalities and corporations for women (Mathai, 2006:83). The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution and inclusion of provisions under Article 243 are regarded as a watershed in the history of state initiative on political empowerment of rural women. It had indicated a paradigm shift in the approach towards the women's cause. Earlier, women were generally viewed as an object of development only. However, this amendment made women the subject of development and an indispensable part of the decision-making process. The amendment also provided for the reservation of one-third of the total number of offices for chairpersons in the panchayat at all levels for women including women from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Due to reservation of seats, the formal participation of women in politics has gone up considerably (Datta, 2001:30).

Concepts like 'Bharat Nirman', 'India Shining', 'Feel Good', 'Rainbow', 'Socio-economic Development', 'Mainstream Development', 'Nation Building Process', 'Grassroots Administration', and 'Good Governance', could not have been possible without the participation and empowerment of women from below. According to economist Amartya Sen: "Women are less likely to secure a favourable outcome for themselves in household decision-making processes. They feel that Empowerment of Women in India through Panchayati Raj system 561 their long-term security lies in subordinating their well-being to that of the male authority figures" (Singh and Kumari, 2007:3-4).

Empowerment of women in general and rural women in particular involves many factors: economic opportunity, property rights, political representation, social equality, personal rights, etc. To empower women is to rectify the historical wrong-doings against them. The central goal of empowerment is to challenge patriarchal ideology, transfer the structures and institutions that re in force and perpetrate gender discrimination and social inequality, enable poor women to gain access to and control over both material and informational resources (Borain, 2003:521). According to the Jakarta Declaration:

Empowerment of women in Indian society involves the building up of a society wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure (Shiva Kumar Lal). One of the major strides for the empowerment of women in India is to empower them politically and more specifically at the grassroots village level. And for this purpose, the panchayati raj system provides an appropriate forum for rural women.

Such an approach provides the women with a constitutional platform to stand up to their men, raise their voice on women oppression, subjugation and related issues and thus in effect, provide them with an identity

in an orthodox socio-political set-up; this, in addition, to providing a much-needed forum to seek redressal of problems directly affecting them, which is the true essence of empowerment.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT BY PANCHAYATI RAJ SINCE 1992

Women's entry into panchayats, both as members as well as heads after the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) has pushed them into the process of decision-making and policy implementation considerably. It has been observed that the integration of women into the political process has an important bearing on the working of the democratic institution (Panda, 2007:10). By 1994, 3,30,000 women had entered politics as a result of panchayats and many more have been elected in the last two years; the percentage of women at various levels of political activity has shifted dramatically, that is, from 4–5% to 25–40% after 1992 (Devaki Jain). By 1999, as many as 7,68,582 women had been elected to gram panchayats, and 38,582 women to panchayat samitis (Fadia, 2006:949).

It is remarkable to note that on August 27, 2003, the then President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam administered the oath of office to 400 women sar panches from Chattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, 562 Sanjay Kumar Pradhan and Geetanjali Dutta Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal. These women took a pledge to follow the Seven-Point Programme prepared by President Kalam for improving life in rural area:

- Children will be valued as our great asset.
- Development of society, education and rights of boys and girls must be given equal importance.
- We will not waste our hard earned money on gambling and alcohol.
- We will keep our family small for better health and prosperity.
- We will make our children understand the importance of education, because education imparts knowledge and knowledge makes children successful.
- We will unite to protect the forests and check pollution.
- Every person will plant at least five trees and saplings.

With these, the President asserted: "The strength and wealth of India lives in villages, and when women become leaders, the mission never fails" (Gill, 2006:83-84).

In Maharashtra, women panchayat members have been found to be taking up issues to ensure potable drinking water and toilet facilities, playgrounds and schools for children on priority. In some villages in Maharashtra, with all-women panchayats, they established the practice of procuring water taps and pipes and getting them repaired within 24 hours. In one village where no teacher had been appointed to the school, 22 women marched to the block development office and they demanded a teacher, with success.

There is caste assertion and good performance of dalits in India in the local administration and management. In Rajasthan, Durga Devi, a Mehtar by caste and sweeper by profession, became the sarpanch of Sarbari village in Rajasthan's Sikar district. She continued sweeping for her livelihood since her honesty prevented her from indulging in practices, which are usually adopted by persons occupying similar positions to make quick money. According to the gram panchayat secretary, 'she has the support of the whole village because she is capable. She also enjoys all the support from her husband who helps her in her ventures'. In another case, Sonia a low caste Kol and panchayat pradhan of Nihin village in Uttar Pradesh took up developmental schemes of the government to reach out to the poorest Kols, something that has never happened before. The village school that was used for stacking fodder started functioning. Sonia has also been able to free the land allotted to 10 landless families. In spite of stiff opposition from the upper caste, influential and rich people in the village, she survived with her courage and conviction (Gill, 2006:88). In Gujarat, a false case of corruption and misuse of office was filed against an upright dalit woman sarpanch, Shakriben, who was doing a commendable job which led to her removal. But she fought back and with the people's support was reinstated (Awasthy, 2006:280). In spite of adverse circumstances, elected women candidates are honest in

nature, do not indulge in corrupt practices and are accurate in presenting issues to the decision-making bodies and authorities (Sree Kumar, 2006: 617 and Singh,2009:25).

Women sarpanches have also alerted the government about its wrong doings. In one such instance, the Rajasthan government fixed Rs. 5 as the budget for preparing 1 kg of ghughri (a dish made from gram) as the mid-day meal for school children. Due to such a meager amount allocated, the basic costs for preparation of the meal could not be met. Looking at the predicament, Premlata, the sarpanch took up the challenge, successfully secured the cooperation of other women of 564 Sanjay Kumar Pradhan and Geetanjali Dutta the village and undertook the responsibility of cooking the meal. As a result the children of the school were served a different meal every day. Women led by Premlata now ensured that school children not only were served the meal daily but also ate it properly and thus motivated children to come to school regularly. Moreover, women in panchayats have earned the place of repute for India. For example, Tiliya Devi, a member of Lakhnore Block panchayat in Bihar was one among the 92 women from India and 158 from South Asia who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005. She emerged as a powerful panchayat leader during her struggle to free 156 acres of land belonging to one of the most downtrodden communities of Bihar, which was encroached upon by upper caste men. Despite having been deserted by her husband for taking up the cause of the dalits, she continued to struggle. She also initiated the creation of GramKosh (village fund) where villagers contributed Rs. 15 every month. This has helped in creating a strong financial support base for emergency situations like marriage, health problems, etc.(Gill, 2006:86 and 89).

Focusing on the importance of women in the panchayati raj system, it is evident that women played the role of personality development, promotion of education, community service and solidarity, arresting alcoholism, reversal of dependence, crackdown of crimes and role reversal (Borain, 2003:521). They have exhibited their leadership in solving some of the local problems and creating facilities for betterment of rural society (Singh,2009:25). A significant milestone has been achieved in dealing with village issues particularly water and sanitation, poverty alleviation through self-help, generating awareness and uplift of weaker sections of society. Moreover, in many states like Rajasthan and Haryana, poor women have improved their socio-economic status by forming self help groups (SHGs). These examples only drive home the point that women leaders will go to any lengths to empower other women and change society; thus acceptability of women as leaders is the need of the hour.

CONTRIBUTION OF NGOS IN THE PROCESS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In India, a number of voluntary organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have endeavoured towards the cause of women and have expanded the tradition of grassroots activism since the mid-'80s. The collective reach of NGOs represents an important element in the overall picture related to women's political awareness and emancipation to make grassroots democracy result-oriented and meaningful. Although NGOs do not have sufficient experience in politics, yet many have appeared on the scene as the government has been unable to deliver. The approach of NGOs are integrated and holistic in nature which can be ascertained through their work. Firstly, by creating organisation programmes for dalits, minorities, landless and labour in the organised and unorganised sectors. Secondly, Empowerment of Women in India through Panchayati Raj system 565 training programmes in the areas of leadership development, capacity building, group dynamics and management-like perspective, that NGOs have adopted: Singamma Srinivasan Foundation and the Hunger Project (SEARCH), Utsahi Mahila Abhyudaya (UMA), Karnataka, Foundation for Research in Community Health (FRCH), Maharashtra, Child in Need Institute (CINI), West Bengal and Young India Project (YIP), Andhra Pradesh. Thirdly, engendering the panchayati raj institutions (PRI)- organizing women in the areas of health, promoting and encouraging self help groups (SHGs) to help the poor and meet their urgent credit needs through thrift; housing, water and sanitation, education and watershed development. The opportunities provided by the small groups dealing with the above issues have been a kind of 'testing ground' for women to enter the larger arena, having been empowered in the smaller arena of panchayati raj;

Fourthly, women in PRIs who have been supported and nurtured by NGOs and those who have been involved in larger people's movements have gained a more 'assertive' stance which gives the man edge over other men in the PRI process. The best examples of this can be seen in the Right to Information movement in Rajasthan and the anti arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh (mirror.undp.org).

NGOs use women collectives such as SHGs or sangh as to create an arena for dialogue and discussion on issues that concern women and the community. SHGs, independently or in support of NGOs, enhance the equality of status of women as participants, decision-makers and beneficiaries in the democratic, economic, social and cultural spheres of life. Using the SHGs as a safe place, NGOs have provided various trainings and workshops, raising awareness of their political rights that were guaranteed in the constitutional amendments, as well as raising women's knowledge of their general rights with regard to social, economic and political arenas. Self-help groups and sanghas are one form of women's grassroots collectives that are being employed as a tool of empowerment. The relationship between the women's collectives and the NGOs is that the latter initiates and supports the formation of groups, facilitates and provides resources and ensures their ongoing development. Therefore, when the rotating seat of a woman candidate arrived at their area, the group would act as a base of female leadership. The women would be informed on the wants and needs of the community, and be motivated, trained and confident. Not only would they provide candidates to contest elections but also provide support and act as an avenue of accountability to the constituency.

POLITICS OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION AND PROBLEMS

In India, women's participation is generally lower either because they have been socialised differently (especially as far as marriage, motherhood, employment and property ownership are concerned), or because they have fewer resources. An implicit assumption in these sets of arguments is that the lower levels of participation of women are mostly the result of a process of socialisation that leads them to think of political activity in a different way than men. In other words, women don't take as active a part in political life because they don't think (as autonomous actors) that political participation is important. An implication that follows from this line of reasoning is that women do not think that entering political life would necessarily be advantageous for if they did, as autonomous actors they would participate (www.worldvaluessurvey.org). The politics of women is in a dilemma — should such women work merely for the improvement of women or stand for the electorate comprising both women and men? If they prioritise the women's cause, then the impediments will be from the dominated male panchayat members and village community; if they work for a common cause, the issue of women empowerment would be sidelined. Moreover, there are several fault lines in the formation of caste, tribe, religion and poverty, and there is no one approach that can be developed. Hence, the problem is complicated in determining selective beneficiaries or target groups and programmes of action.

The structural aspects, such as problems of funding and rotation of reserved women constituencies, are important hurdles in the process of independent, effective and successful functioning of a woman sarpanch. Most times, she has to depend on the Block Development Officer (BDO) for funds. Hence, this dependency can handicap the vision of women candidates and they find it difficult for timely intervention and concrete action on working towards resolving problems and implementing various programmes.

Recently, some sarpanches blamed government policy, as there is no consistency of reservation in a particular seat for a long period. Because of the rotation of reserved women seats, a seat which is reserved for one election goes unreserved for the next. Thus, a woman panchayat Empowerment of Women in India through Panchayati Raj system 567 member who served for one term successfully may not be able to seek re-election from the same constituency and thus reservation serves no meaningful purpose and empowerment barely achieved by them (Satpathy, 2002).

In India, since the mandatory introduction of panchayati raj institutions, many achievements and progress have been made to empower women through the participatory democracy of panchayati raj. However, its achievement and progress is subjected to a litmus test in the light of problems and obstacles in the genuine political participation and empowerment of women. Many instances could be cited to prove this. The all-women panchayats in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Tripura and women representatives in tribal areas have become very active with progressive results. But this does not mean that all have been well. In 1995, a workshop of elected women panchayat members of these states made an embarrassing revelation that most women were surrogates for male family member and exercised no powers and functions. Most of these women were illiterate and lived in purdah. They were escorted by male members who not only took active part in deliberation but also took decisions. Thus women are considered inferior to their male counterparts.

Though there is a training programme launched for elected women representative along with the males, in many cases the women did not attend the meeting due to pressure from their husbands because there were no separate training programmes for women (Awasthy, 2006:278). Dalit women get trapped in the vortex of both the patriarchal order and caste system. In Madhya Pradesh, a woman class sarpanch from a backward caste was stripped naked during an extended panchayat meeting in the presence of the Block Development Officer (BDO) when she refused to comply with the demands of her male counterparts.

Caste politics has created a 'bad name' in Uttar Pradesh where the intention of political parties is largely to secure, hold and sustain power through caste support rather than the real development of the caste and state as a whole. In 1995, the election to panchayati raj institutions was held after the Supreme Court jurisdiction. However, writ petitions were filed against as many as 25 districts where the reservation quota of Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes (OBC) and women went far above 50%, a limit set-up by the Supreme Court for reservation. It was alleged that Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav was taking caste politics to the grassroots level. The state government delimited the panchayat areas which not only changed the geographical boundaries but also the caste composition of Gram Sabhas. As a result, the villages that were dominated by upper castes had pradhans from lower castes. But this was met with a violent reaction when a dozen lower caste pradhans, including women pradhans were killed, a price they paid for becoming the heads of upper caste dominated villages. Opposition parties criticised the manner in which election to the panchayati raj bodies was held and alleged that Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav has used the panchayati raj not for decentralisation of power, but concentration of power by mobilizing people on the caste lines (Awasthy, 2006:278).

A study conducted by Satpathy (2002) in Orissa reveals that the list for the women candidature was finalised either by the husband, Empowerment of Women in India through Panchayati Raj system brother-in-law or senior male member. It is very strange, as the one who is contesting the election did not attend the meeting where her candidature was finalised. In the same study, he found that most of the elected leaders had no knowledge about their role, major projects and funding. The sarpanch and nominees said that they consult local party leaders before going to any meeting. These disabilities were compounded by the fact that many of these women owed their elected position to their husband or influential politician or person. In order to fulfil the reserved quota, political workers have to deploy various strategies to convince the women and one of the most adopted strategies is to influence the women through their family members (Mahanta and Sinha, 2007). Hence, rural women leaders are 'leaders through' their husbands or some other male relative. Thus, they may be classified as passive spectators who are unable to strike their entry to actual panchayat decision-making and decision execution. This phenomenon is even more apparent in the case of women belonging to SCs or STs.

Lack of proper education and necessary orientation are hurdles for women to play an effective role in the panchayats. Social obligations and traditional control of women folk by family members and their

commitment to house hold work also serve as obstacles in permitting women representatives to function effectively. The Kerala experience as gathered from the discussions in the International Conference on Democratic Decentralization (2000) tends to demonstrate that despite the tradition of progressive movements and high literacy, women representatives had faced many difficulties in the initial years. Many were unwilling entrants into the tumultuous world of elective office because of the wrath of their families for keeping late hours and neglecting the home (Pargunan, 2007:13-14). Moreover, the panchayati raj institutions still do not enjoy fiscal autonomy.

In a patriarchal structure, women never enjoy justice. They are not allowed in public places and, if allowed, they face humiliation at the hands of colleagues, community members and bureaucrats and works as second fiddle to their husbands in discharging duties. In some states like Uttar Pradesh, male candidates are manipulating no-confidence

Women's groups and movements have approached the state and pressurized it to frame a pro-woman policy. While the state has framed seemingly pro-women policies, these have actually not helped to break sexual stereo types and male dominance. The policies have not been able to achieve the objective of equality and political development. As a result, Empowerment of Women in India through Panchayati Raj system 571 women continue to have contradictory experiences with regard to state policies and this raises the question as to how women should relate to the state and what strategies should be adopted towards the state on account of its unwillingness to change the status quo to help women genuinely. Doubts have been raised as to whether anymore demands should be made to the state for more policies. It has been observed that due to various reasons, which include pressures of national, international and the women's movement, studies of international aid agencies and political and electoral considerations, the state has resorted to a 'symbolic' political, electoral considerations and policy makings without bringing in any real changes in the lives of women.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Empowerment of women at the grassroots level has to be cultivated to transform the state of helplessness and passivity of the social structure to a state of hope and action. Unfortunately, neither the Centre nor the state governments have put forward specific legislations to deal with the problems of women at the panchayati raj level and empower them politically. Similarly, the role of NGOs and SHGs has not proved significantly; the constitutional and legal steps are under scrutiny; and gender bias based on a patriarchal notion of sex-role stereotype obstacles the successful performance of elected women representatives in the process of political participation at the village level. The existing problems in the system of panchayati raj should be looked at with recommendations for necessary changes to make women's participation in tune and temper of democratic decentralisation and empowerment of rural women. Important steps and measures for this purpose can be attributed through the following interventions which will prove to have far-reaching implications:

- The basic problems of women at the rural level need to be addressed and resolved because the poor and dalit elected representatives, who depend on daily wage and income, do not show their enthusiasm for attending meetings regularly, and it is true that social and political development at the panchayat level cannot be successful by sacrificing their basic needs. There fore, it is necessary to compensate them for their loss. If income and social security improved, women would automatically become self-dependent and the pivotal force of elected members in panchayat will reckon.
- Channelise the welfare and women-centric programmes in a proper, time-bound and result-oriented manner by which the target groups will be the real beneficiary.
- The panchayati raj institutions in India are running into an acute financial problem. For their economy, they have to depend on the state government. In the absence of fiscal autonomy and shortage of funds they will be unable to implement the plans and programmes successfully. As a result, the credibility of the

women's performance comes to question. There is the need of real and substantial areas of revenue generation and reasonable devolution of power for this purpose by the state governments

- The state administration should spearhead gender sensitisation, and it would be possible by training its personnel at all levels to view women as important political entities capable of shouldering responsibilities, introduce regular gender sensitive reorientation programmes for the MPs, MLAs, villagers, bureaucrats and office bearers of the panchayat.
- In the present context, the national and state commissions for women set up by the government have the mandate only to recommend to the government. They lack the power to take appropriate and effective measures to address the various issues concerning women and to modify or correct the existing policies and schemes formulated by the government towards their development and empowerment. To make the commissions vibrant and successful, they should have power like the National Commission of Minorities and Human Rights Commission.
- One-third reservation for women in all levels of the parties to be introduced through electoral reforms. Apart from this, in the political party hierarchy, there should be efforts to have at least a minimum of 33% women in all levels of decision-making.
- Highlighting, glorifying and rewarding women in politics who have successfully confronted maladministration and male hegemony. This will be a motivating factor to other women to enter into politics. The state NGOs, SHGs and individual efforts are required to streamline women success.
- Lack of information, awareness and financial resources make women easy targets of corrupt bureaucrats and politicians. Hence, state funding of the elections will generate a better environment which will promote women who generally have no control over their earnings and form the low-waged or non-waged strata of the society to on test elections and check the politics of 'influence and power'.
- The present training system and facilities for elected members is totally inadequate. Hence, the state government must immediately Empowerment of Women in India through Panchayati Raj system allocate adequate resources for conducting capacity-building programmes for the elected women representatives and functionaries of PRIs. The training programme should include topics like roles and responsibilities of women representatives, which should include information about present day functioning of the system, local body elections, and legal competencies of various tiers, set up Panchayat Training Centres for women at least one in each division, strengthen the capacity-building and skill up gradation through crash courses for illiterate women members, and internet access for information, communication and competency.
- Rather than seeking permission for each technical issue, it will be better if a technical manual is prepared giving relevant information on the common types of rural work which can be used by village panchayats without the need to refer their problems to the junior engineers and officials always.
- Women's collectives like SHGs and sanghas should do more for encouraging, supporting and facilitating the women's involvement within the panchayats both as a candidate and as an aware citizen.
- NGOs cannot empower all women with the same tool. There are cracks in the system due to violence, caste and religion. Despite the success stories of women's collectives, NGOs must be aware of these women who fall through the cracks. Because if the NGOs themselves do not attempt to reach out to them, there is no guarantee if the women's collectives, the female elected representative or anyone else will.
- There should be stringent laws to check the proxy role of the husband or in-laws. Women members should be suspended from their position if found guilty of allowing the family members to take part in decision-making in public places.
- Apart from the state, NGOs, collective and individual efforts, legal and statutory measures, the need of the hour is to change societal stereotypes, gender bias, patriarchal and feudal mindset of the people. This requires a revolutionary spread of information and education among men and women and determination for change. The men should shoulder the responsibility for the miserable plight of the women in society and work sincerely for gender equality starting at the grassroots level. Similarly, women should defy the existing odds such as regressive restrictions and the rigid role differentiations based on gender, and should

be conscious of their own rights and duties, powers and responsibilities in the framework of panchayati raj.

Even if girls are enrolled, their dropout rate is very high. We must understand the consequences of not educating our girl child. When a woman is not educated then it not only affects her but the entire family as well as the society or Nation. In many studies it has been found out that illiterate women have high fertility as well as mortality rate. It has been seen that infant mortality rate reduces to half in case women have received primary education as compared to illiterate female. Apart from this children, of illiterate woman are malnourished. Illiteracy also reduces the overall earning potential of the family.

Women must be educated for a healthy and a happy life of female and whole family. An educated woman can be a better human being, successful mother and a responsible citizen. Educating women will definitely increase the living standard both at her own home and outside too. An educated woman will force her kids to study further and wish them to live a better life than hers. Educating women results in promoting self respect and also helps in raising the status of women. An educated woman will be aware of her rights. She can fight against social evils such as crime at work place, domestic violence, dowry demand, unequal wages etc.

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