

INDIA'S EXPERIMENT WITH LOCAL DEMOCRACY



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Chapter 4

PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION: AN INSTRUMENT OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN

Motabbir Alam

"A woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutes details of the activities of man. She has the same right of freedom and liberty as he..."

- M.K. Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

This is often argued that women need to participate in the realm of political decision making so that naturalize their "true and cordial" empowerment. For a long time since dawn of civilization, women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men. They are confined with domestic affairs, away from political arena. Women subordination is a patriarchal legacy. There can be no real prosperity if half of women race of a country held back in the process of development. Mahatma Gandhi also believed that complete and compatible development of the nation and establishment of a just society is possible only when women participate actively and fully in the political discussion of the nation. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee on Panchayati Raj System insisted that rural women should be made equal partners in its developmental affairs as a contributor. The Constitutional Amendment (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 gives constitutional recognition to the panchayats as institution of local self government have opened a new era for "grass root democracy" in India. Panchayati Raj Institution implies decentralisation of power, which are acting as the units of self government at the

lowest levels, will ensure and foster women's participation in politics and administration to run their own affairs with no training or experience whatsoever in public life. Women have been given power, but they are seen as a source of status enhancement, not as political entities. Thus, these elected women were only fronts for their husbands or fathers or sons and very often did not attend the panchayats out of fear or ignorance.

However, through the PRIs women take an active participation in decision making process, which paved the way for women empowerment. It gives women's right to "free and full" independence and made them to set their own judgement. This "Grass root democracy" is the modern form of direct democracy.

The present paper is an attempt to analyse the participatory democracy and to understand the participation and trends in women in politics in Indian context with special reference to women's empowerment in grass roots politics.

The Primary Objectives of the Study

1. To develop an understanding and need of women political participation and empowerment in the progress of human society.
2. To verify the existence of disparity and inconveniences faced by women in their participation in the Panchayat Raj Institutions.
3. To analyse the participation of women in rural politics and their empowerment.
4. To identify the obstacles that hindered the participation and empowerment of women in the PRIs.

Women Empowerment

Political participation and empowerment are interconnected process, they occur at the same time. Participation is an essential ingredient of empowerment. Empowerment is a multidimensional and dynamic concept. The concept of women empowerment has predominantly become a focus on political participation. The constitutional Amendment Bill 73rd regarding reservation for women in PRIs has become a restricted discourse on the role of women in formal representative institutions of decision-making. In this process, empowerment of women

emerges as an extremely limited concept. In fact, empowerment should imply a power to participate in the decision-making in all spheres of society, with no separation of public and private and in all social, political, economic and cultural processes in society. Apart from these "Empowerment" includes overall development in terms of education, employment, legislative powers, decision-making power and health and awareness. Now the question here is: How can we improve the condition of women who constituted 50% of the world population, comprise 33.3% of the official labour force, perform nearly 66.6% of all working hours, receive 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of world's property.

The year 1975 was declared as the "International Year for Women" by the United Nations to highlight the problems faced by half of the humanity throughout the world. Subsequently, the period 1975-85 was designated as the U. N. World Decade for Women Equality, Development and Peace. Then, 2001 the year of "Empowerment of Women" was celebrated all over the world. The challenge before us is not to just talk about the "gender equality" and awareness, but to start the process of transforming societies to turn away from "gender discrimination."

From the historical perspective, women have been placed in unequal positions in all societies. The intensity of their subjugation and exploitation as well as oppression varies from society to society and time to time, but in no society has it been eliminated completely. Subordination of women is a fundamental feature of patriarchal society, where men stand at the top and women at the bottom. J.S. Mill argued that the subjection of women to men was not only wrong itself; it was also the chief impediment in the way to human progress.

In order to overcome male dominance, prejudices, economic dependency, traditionalism, evil bondage and to play active and equal role in every spheres of life women empowerment is very essential. Women's empowerment is a process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and fabrics of society.

In short empowerment means the rebuilding of structures of subordination, through radical changes in law, property rights, control over women's labour and bodies, and the institutions, which reinforce and perpetuate male domination. Women's empowerment is not against men, but against the system of patriarchy and all its manifestations. Women empowerment through constitutional reservation is a good tool.

Women empowerment in all spheres and particularly in political sphere is very crucial for their prosperity and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the aims of equality, development and peace. There can be no true democracy without equal participation of men and women at every levels of decision making. Participation of women in political field is integral to the advancement of women. Women empowerment is a vital basic condition for all-round development of any society.

Political empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, greater decision making power and control and to transformative action. Bargava and Subha define political empowerment 'as the capacity to influence decision-making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system. It implies political participation which includes right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment. Political empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition at par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity.

Participatory Democracy

Before understanding the concept of participatory democracy, we must understand first what is democracy? The word "democracy" derives from two Greek words 'demos' and 'kratos'. The former means people while the later means rule or government. Thus etymologically "democracy" means government or rule of the people. Of all the form of government, democracy is no doubt, the best. It is the rule of the people, by them and for their welfare.

All the models of democracy can be broadly divided into two categories. One is direct democracy. It may be called participatory democracy. Another broad type of democracy is representative democracy or indirect democracy.

Participatory democracy, a type democracy which is emphasises on the broad involvement of people in the direction and operations of all types of institutions in a political system. Participatory democracy means a democracy which is conducted by people's active or direct participation. It is that type of democracy where people assemble at an open place and directly participate in all the deliberations. It never permits its functions to be performed through representatives. People themselves enjoy supreme power and by exercising it they enjoy the absolute authority to take decisions which generally affect the state or body politic. Participatory democracy is the critical both the classical and modern democratic theory.

Political philosophers like J.S. Mill, Rousseau and Bentham have strongly advocated the need for participation of people in different spheres of political life. It ensures;

1. It ensures true freedom
2. An equal right to self development
3. Decentralisation of power, both vertically and horizontally
4. Developing a sense of political efficacy
5. Open-institutional system
6. Concern for collective problems
7. Participation every walk of life
8. Accountability; and
9. Contribution to the formation of a knowledgeable citizenry.

The aim of participatory democracy has been best described by Rousseau. If the law and general administration is meant for people, it is logical that behind this law and running the administration there shall lie the consent of the people. He said, "every law the people have not ratified in person is null and void."

Mill has argued that through the participatory democracy the development of human being can be achieved. The most important aim of it is to make people interested in the political,

legal, and economic processes of the state. Through this they will learn to think that the state affairs are their own. In other words, it will make people more responsible. Its another purpose is to kindle up the innovative qualities of man. Under the participatory democracy the people are given a constructive role by actually initiate the policies.

As Pateman says, "it enhances a sense of estrangement from power centres, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of an active and knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a more acute interest in government affairs." Participatory democracy has been given privilege to the marginalised sections of the society at the local levels.

Women empowerment through 73rd and 74th Amendment (constitutional) Acts is a new dimension in Indian democratic discourse. As the women make up half of the population of India, their participation at grass roots politics is very essential to make the democratic governance more participatory and successful. From the Kothari's point of view "a successful democracy means a greater involvement of participation of people in the political system (Rethinking Democracy-2005)." Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment had structured for better governance which would provide political space to the disadvantaged sections of the society like SCs, STs and Women.

Women's Participation in Panchayats

For sustainable economic and social development to take place in any country, it is necessary that people participate in the political process. At present, across the country today, there is a marked presence of women in the panchayats. 73rd constitutional Amendment Act (1992) created space for women in political participation and decision-making at the grass root level by providing that 1/3rd of the seats would be reserved for women all over the country. This is estimated that more than 10 million women in all three tiers of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). Women participation in the political process at the grass root levels have helped women to break out traditional mould.

It is stated that the provision of the Panchayat Raj Act by all the states would ensure the presence of approximately 7.95 million women in the Panchayat Raj System at the village, block and district levels. One-third (1/3) of chair person at three levels of panchayat administration about 76,200- would be women. In this way representative democracy will be introduced at the grass root levels.

Both the Constitutional Amendment act in 1992, were considered as an historic initiative for solidify democracy. The constitutional 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 which provides a three tiers system of panchayati Raj in every State that is Gram panchayat at the village levels, panchayat samiti at the block levels and Zilla parishad at the district levels. The act provides for the reservation of not less than 1/3(i.e.33.33%) of the total number of seats for women (including SCs and STs).

Women participation in local rural politics facilitates women's political empowerment. Thus women play an active role in the political arena of the nation, which pave the way for women empowerment. Political right is very important for women's empowerment. This is very much needed for any human group's empowerment. So we must try to locate who are there in power centers and who have their hegemony, who are there in the decision making process, what roles do women play?

An essential ingredient of a satisfactory democracy is that a considerable proportion should have the experience of active participation in the work of small self-governing groups, whether in connection with local government, trade unions, co-operatives or other forms of activity. Despite reservation of seats for women in politics, their ratio is very low. Several factors are responsible for women's low participation. A number of studies on political participation and representation have presented that women in general are less interested and participative in politics than men. This has usually explained that women are less educated and less exposed to mass media and hence, less informed of political issues. Such an explanation may be treated as over simplification of the fact that women are less participative in politics. The lack of participation and representation by women in the politics cannot be attributed to

their nature. One should consider the power structure of society and women low possession in terms of resources.

Problems and Challenges in Women's Participation in PRIs

In spite of reservation for women, effective participation in PRIs has failed due to misuse and manipulation by the local power brokers. Ignorance and unconsciousness of women about their rights and procedures and about their potential and responsibilities has kept them far backward in the local bodies. It is very much doubtful that only increase in the number of reserved seats for women in local bodies is likely to increase the participation of women. Unless and until structural changes are brought about, a sincere effort is to launch, educate women and power structures existing in rural areas are neutralised, women empowerment is impossible fully. Women representatives often run into barriers (social and cultural) and are hindered from participating effectively. They hesitate to speak especially when they are in large male dominated assemblies. Those who muster up enough courage and strength to speak, receive very little respect or attention. It has been observed that women are invited only to complete the quorum.

Family, state and community have together created a situation wherein elected women representatives are facing many operational constraints while playing their roles and performing their function in the PRIs. There are a number of issues and challenges, which hinder the women's participation in PRIs. The factors that constrain participation and empowerment of women in rural politics can be categories — structural, cultural and institutional.

Structural factors comprise the "supply side" variables. Women's participation in elections will largely depend on the extent of availability of these basic resources. A general perception in societies around the world is that women's major role is to cook food, take care of the children and household. In most of developing countries only the reproductive role of women is recognised. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for women to participate in the public sphere of life. Cultural factors therefore offer constraint to women participation in politics. Institutional factors such as quota-

system may also impact women's political participation and empowerment. Apart from these the other issues and challenges faced by women representatives are follows-

1. Non-cooperation of the male members that they primarily face on the basis of gender discrimination.
2. Elected women members are sometimes used as dolls behind their husband or men in the family. In many parts of India especially in northern states the husband performs the duties of the women pradhans and gram sabha members in lieu of the women themselves.
3. Often the men of the village do not accord them the respect and regard that is their due. Officials take advantage of their inexperience and poor education.
4. Overburdened with family responsibilities.
5. Poor socio-economic background with which the women have come into the system and poor capacity building.
6. Closed socialisation process is one of the major impediments of women political participation and empowerment.

It is very obvious that only reservation is not enough because a women representative lacks qualitative participation due to both internal and external factors. Women's empowerment is not something which can be handed over to women. This is a process, which involves sincerity, earnestness and capacity and capability on the part of both the sexes. It is a very challenging task in village India as even in 21 century women cannot take any independent decision. Women feel inferior and subordinate to her husband and even to her son.

SUGGESTIONS

In order to empower rural women it requires enhancing their qualitative and quantitative participation. Their qualitative participation can be achieved through training besides of course of the literacy educational programmes. Special programmes on the role of women in PRIs on rights of women and procedures should be prepared and highlighted through the mass media so as to make women aware and improve the quality of their participation in the socio-political system. There should be a remedy for each problem of rural women participation. It

should be followed by comprehensive empowerment policies and programs. Some issues and problems and their redressed are as below:

1. **Low status and moral:** Every woman generally starts believing in her inferiority, in her inherent dependence and in her capacity to tolerate more. They feel inferior to male members of family/panchayats. These attitudes need to be changed to make women as part and parcel of the family as well as panchayats.
2. **Lack of knowledge and interest:** Necessity of enthusiasm and training – women lack interest in PRIs on account of the lukewarm attitude to PRIs by the Union and States governments. They must generate zeal within themselves to alter with a spirit of dedication and respect. They would be given proper training and education in the working of the politico-administrative institutions.
3. **Dependence upon men since childhood:** In Indian villages, girl remains dependent upon the father, brother or cousin and this feeling continues in their married life. We must give capacity building training to girls in the schools, homes to be free and independent. Unless and until they become independent, sustained and effective participation and empowerment of women in the public sphere is not possible.
4. **Forum to exchange ideas:** Requirement for all women forum – Elected women representatives of three tier should meet in a regular interval and formulate integrated plans. In this manner, they would be more participative while deliberating on important issues.
5. Women from SC and ST categories may find it difficult to mix with representatives of general categories. To cope with this problem, it is necessary to inculcate confidence among them and to bring attitudinal change through training in the psyche of the upper classes.
6. There is need of taking independent decision. Women representatives in PRIs must be trained in the art and science of decision-making so that they are not influenced by external factors. They must develop leadership qualities. They should discuss among other women and take opinion. All women members of panchayats and other executive bodies must be trained and empowered to exercise their authority.

7. Empowerment of rural women can be made possible not only through reservations but it also requires removal of the causes of dis-empowerment whether social, cultural, political and psychological.
8. The prevailing male dominated power structure in the village is not ready to accept women as chairpersons. This requires special and firm reservation for women from top to bottom.
9. It requires to abolish gender discrimination in order to pay equal importance to women and their empowerment.
10. Need of motivation by women MLAs and MPs. Women MLAs and MPs should visit frequently the elected representatives of PRIs to solve the problems faced by the rural women members. They should help and encourage them to take decision rationally and independently.

CONCLUSION

Indian constitution provides equal rights and opportunities for all citizens irrespective of their sex, race and colour, social and economic status. However, such provisions exist only in pen and paper for millions of economically and socially backward people in India especially ST's, SC's and Women. In India women are in much worst position than men not only in terms of sex ratio, literacy rate, work force participation, life expectancy, but also in terms of their access to power structure which controls and guides the development programmes of a society. Mill argued that the subjection of women to men was not only wrong itself; it was also the major impediment in the way to human progress.

A Society in which the reservoir of its talents remained suppressed or unutilized could hardly be expected to realize the full potential of its progress. Hence in order to promote social development we must stop the subjection of women and establish full equality between men and women. In order to ensure and sustain participation and empowerment of women in political arena, the issue of reservation of one-third of the seats for women in grass root levels must be given a true picture so that women can take part in the process of development of human civilization. Women need to be involved in decision-making process in order to bring their demands in the national