



Women's Representation In The Local Self Governance; Creating The Politics Of Presence

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Abstract

The concept of democratic decentralization or the local self- government are often founded upon the notion that the democratization and empowerment of local political bodies will create institutions that would be more accountable to local citizens and more appropriate to local needs, interests and preferences Democratic decentralization exhibits the extension of a democracy at the grass-root level in view of the fact that the people's participation signifies a democratic government not merely at the top but also at the foundation level of a political system of a country. The Representation of women in panchayats through the 73rd and 74th Indian. constitutional amendment act, have provided a possibility for demolishing traditional gender, caste and religious prejudices and has helped in bringing huge change not only in the social nature of the state but also in the true democratic spirit of this republican government. However, some questions still have to be carefully revisited: whether this constitutional amendment will be able to represent truly the women section, will deeper the concept of women's empowerment and the concept of politics of presence or the existing patriarchal structures believes continue to dominate in the society. This paper is an attempt to understand and critically analyse Women's representation in the local self-government in Assam, especially in the Barak Valley.

Keywords: Women, representation, local-self government.

Introduction

The Panchayati Raj is a basically South Asian political system mainly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. The Panchayati Raj system and local self-governance was the dream of 'Gram Swaraj' of Mahatma Gandhi and motto of 'Power to People' are essence of true democracy. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution in 1992 gave Constitutional status to the Panchayats as institutions of local self-government and also for planning and implementing programmes for economic development and social justice of every person in India. As per the assessment of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj even after 20 years of enactment of 73rd Constitutional (Amendment) Act and also after having three rounds of Panchayat elections in many States in India, the empowerment of Panchayats has not taken place as envisioned in the 73rd Constitution (Amendment) Act in 1992. This paper sets out to give in brief the origins of the concept of Panchayati raj system in

India. It will focus on how this system has been working in Assam, especially in the Barak region and to what extent the women are becoming a part of it.

Panchayati Raj System in India:

Panchayats have been the backbone of the Indian villages. In 1946, Gandhi appealed everyone that the Indian independence must begin at the bottom and every village ought to be a Republic or a Panchayat with powers. His dream of Gram Swaraj got translated into reality with the introduction of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system in India to ensure people's participation from the bottom level of Indian politics. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 (or the Panchayati Raj Act) marks a new era in the federal democratic set up of India. It provided India a system for functioning as an organic and integral part of the nation's democratic process, which is inclusive in nature. It came into force with effect from April 24, 1993 and did not apply to the Schedule V areas of the nine states, Schedule VI Areas of the North-East and the District of Darjeeling in the west Bengal as well as J&K. The Act has five main features: (a) a 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all States having population of over 20 lakh; (b) Panchayat elections regularly every 5 years; (c) reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women (not less than one-third of seats); (d) appointment of State Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats, and (e) constitution of District Planning Committees to prepare development plans for the district as a whole. Thus, the Panchayats have been endowed with such powers and authority as may be necessary to function as institutions of self- government and social justice from the grass root level. However, the PESA Act, 1996 is regarded as a corrective legal measure to the 73rd amendment (Panchayati Raj Act) in order to extend the provisions of the Panchayat Raj to the Scheduled and Tribal areas falling under the Schedule Five areas of the nine States, namely Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan. It tried to empower the tribal and recognized their space in the main stream political agenda. Accepting a clearcut role of the community, it gives wide-ranging powers to Gram Sabhas, which had hitherto been denied to them since long decade. The State Governments were required to enact their legislation in accordance with the Provisions of Act before the expiry of one year i.e. 23rd December, 1997.

Panchayati Raj System in Assam:

In 1957, the Balwantrai Mehta committee was appointed to review the working of the Community Development Programme. The Mehta Committee recommended a three-tier system of panchayats. It said that at the grass root level, the village panchayat should be constituted by direct election on the basis of adult franchise. At the mid-level, Panchayat Samiti should be indirectly elected by the village panchayats and at the apex level, Zilla Parishad should be members consisting of the Presidents of Panchayats Samities, the and district Collector level officers of 29 the development departments with as its Chairman.

In conformity with the Mehta Committee's recommendations Government of Assam enacted the Assam Panchayat Act, 1959. This Act provided for a three-tier structure with Gaon Panchayat at the base level, Anchalik Panchayat at the intermediate level and Mahkuma Parishad at the Sub-divisional level. The Gaon Panchayat was the executive body of the Gaon Sabha. It consisted of not more than eleven and not less than nine members directly elected on the basis of adult suffrage. The Anchalik Panchayat consisted of the representatives of the Gaon Panchayats, the members of Parliament and State Legislature, the representatives of cooperative societies within the area of AP. The Mahkuma Parishad, created at the Sub-divisional level, replaced the erstwhile local board. It consisted of the Presidents of APs, the MPs, MLAs, the DC and the SDO. The Assam Panchayat Act, 1959 was replaced by the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972. The Act of 1972 abolished the intermediate level AP and introduced a two-tier system having Mahkuma Parishad at the Sub-divisional level and GP at the lower level. The salient feature of the Act has been the extension of Panchayati Raj system to tea garden areas. The GP had fifteen elected members. The President was directly elected. The Vice-President was elected from amongst the members of GPs. In fact, the Act of 1972 brought about changes more or less akin to the recommendations of the Ashok Mehta Committee which was set up six years later in 1978. The Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986 replaced the earlier Act of 1972. The Act of 1986 again reintroduced the three-tier system of GP having a population ranging from 6000 to 8000 at the village level, AP at the intermediate level (co-terminus with the block) and MP at the apex level (co terminus with the Sub-division).³⁰ Under the provision of this Act, Panchayat election was held in February 1992. A total of 2486 GPs, 196 APs and 43 MPs had been constituted. The Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 marked a watershed in the history of local self-government in India. The Act provided for the creation of a three-tier system of PRIs, viz, GP at the village level, AP at the block level and ZP at the district level, with functions listed in Schedule XI of the Act. It provided for creation of the State Election Commissions to ensure free, fair and timely election at the expiry of every five years. It also provided for the constitution of the State Finance Commission after every five years to recommend devolution of finances from the State Government to the Local Bodies. In keeping with the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act, the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 was enacted and it replaced the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986. The Act provided for a three-tier panchayat system comprising of GP at the village level, AP at the block level and ZP at the district level. The Act provided for the constitution of a District Planning Committee to draw up the district plan. It also provided for the setting up of a State Election Commission and a State Finance Commission at the expiry of every five years. The first panchayat election in terms of the Act of 1994 was held in December 2001. Accordingly, 2487 GPs, 203 APs and 21 ZPs had been constituted. However, after the creation of BTAD, the numbers of GPs, APs, and ZPs were reduced to 2202, 185 and 20 respectively.

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(Karimganj District)

In Karimganj district in the three-tier system of gram panchyats we have in total 960 ward members, 96 Gaon panchyat presidents (GP), 7 numbers of anchalik panchayat president (AP) and 20 numbers of zillaparishad (ZPC)members. That is in total we have 1083 of representatives in the three the system of panchayat raj institutions. Amongst these elected members a good number of female representatives are also there. The president of Zilla Parishad of Karimganj district is also female. The active participation of female elected members in gaon panchayats is considered taking the awareness score and involvement score of the female elected members in the different activity under the three-tire system of PRIs. Thus, for ensuring participation of women in the grass root level democracy of course requires first of all the awareness of the women regarding their role in the panchayats. It is found that the awareness score of the rural elected female members regarding the structure and functioning of Panchyats and regarding women rights and women empowerment is 0.34 whereas when asked the same to the rural women in general it is found to be 0.16. This implies that both the women who are the general rural women and who are elected as panchyat members keeps very less information regarding the structure and functioning of PRIs and even regarding their rights and empowerment. However a amongst the elected members of the PRIs, the elected members of ZPC is found to be more aware then the ward members, GP president or AP member. It is found that the total awareness score of the ZP member is 0.67, while next is AP member of 0.29 followed by GP president (0.24) and ward members (0.16). As we have taken 1 to be complete awareness score and 0 to be complete unawareness, then it is found that none of the members even have a moderate level of consciousness. This poor level of awareness is due to the existing illiteracy among the rural women, secondly, they are also politically illiterate and thus are not politically conscious; thirdly, they are dependent on their male counterpart and thus, finds no need of gathering knowledge or have no queries too. In such a situation where complete awareness is far behind, to expect complete involvement from the female participation in panchayats is a far behind dream. It is found that most of the rural women participate in the PRIs since the seat is reserved for women. The participation as ward member, GP President and ZPC is hundred percent for women reservation. While talking with the elected female members it was found that earlier in these seats their male counterpart either husband, father, brother or uncle was elected and now since it is reserved so they are participating now. It has two interpretations, firstly, since the seat is being is reserved for women now, at least they could come out of their domestic bindings and participate which secondly widens the path for women. Again, another thing to be mentioned here that the ZP member who are motivated to participate by their male counterpart, once being elected are efficiently managing their duties as they are participating in the meeting as well also taking decisions. This is no doubt a positive sign of women empowerment and active participation of women in grass root level democracy.

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Conclusion:

With the above in background we can summarize that proper awareness should be created among the women so that they become well aware of their rights particularly the political right, as the equal member of a society and state as well. There is need to change the mind set of this particular section of the society so that they can make their presence in the political and sociological nature of the state. However, to improve the situation relating to women's participation in politics, it is necessary to make alterations in the educational, economic and social spheres of the society and state. Therefore, efforts should be made both from the legal grounds and the sociological grounds to make women's political consciousness and to encourage women to participate in political affairs. The main cornerstone of a democratic country with equal representation, equal rights to choose our political leaders, to involve in the political affairs of the state, can't be possible without the equal representation of women of a democratic as well as republican country.

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