



Political Participation And Leadership Of Women In Panchayati Raj Institutions In India

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Abstract

Political Participation and Leadership are at the core of every political system. But these are much more important in a democracy because democracy always emphasizes on involving the people in the decision making process and it thrives on political participation of people. "If democracy is interpreted as rule by the people, then the question of who participates in political decisions becomes the question of the nature of democracy in a society". The participation and leadership of women in general is not very encouraging in India. In India, the male participation has always been more than the women participation. In this context the participation and leadership of women Sarpanches at the grass root institutions makes for an interesting study as the gross roots institutions train the women as leaders and representatives of people and prepare them to shoulder greater responsibilities and play bigger roles in the political system.

The enactment of the 73rd Amendment Act with a view to involve women in decision-making provides psychological empowerment and a sense of political efficacy to those who had been left powerless to influence public decisions that affect them. This is indeed a welcome, though delayed, gesture, for democracy will not be meaningful in a traditional society like India without the full involvement of women and other weaker segments of society. But a constitutional provision is only a necessary and enabling step which should be followed by effective measures for women's uplift in the country. The main aim of the paper is to explore political participation and leadership of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in India.

Key words: Political Participation, Leadership, Women and Panchayati Raj Institutions

Introduction

Women are a major force behind life pattern of society not only today but since the time immemorial. Not only do they comprise the majority of those excluded from participation, but they play a leading role in the emergence of groups, organizations and movements worldwide, and are increasingly becoming active in their communities,

governments and the international arena (Karl, 1967). At this juncture in order to turn their demands into reality they called for a through change of age old social system which discriminate against women and shackle them in the fetters of the 'domestic slavery' and in effect 'legalized prostitution'. Because of these and many other special characteristics, women's movement of 1960s came to be called 'Women's Liberation Movement' (Rekha, 2011). Perhaps this was one of the most effective women's movement exclusively launched by women themselves in the entire human history. The women's liberation or feminist movement of the later part of the sixties and early part of the seventies, conceptualized women's problems rooted in sexism which was manifested in as the power of men over women. The feminist implied that women were the oppressed groups, that women's problems were political, social, religious, economic and legal, and that these problems can be solved by women's participation in all these spheres (Sidney and Norman, 1972).

Our's is the largest democracy in the world where women folk constitute nearly half of the total population. It is astonishing that though the constitution of India guarantees equal rights to woman along with men. But due to various reasons their participation in politics is very less. In a male dominated society like India it is very difficult for women to come and compete with their counterparts. Even then some of the women have successfully crossed hurdles and reached their goals.

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Democracy becomes successful when the active and continuous participation of the different sections of people at different levels of the decision making system is ensured, through their participation people select their representatives and authorize them to take decisions on their behalf; this provisions ensures the protection of the interests of people. Through their political participation people convey their choice on the decision makers. Political participation integrates the people with the political system and motivates them to make their contributions in the political process of the country.

Political participation implies taking political decisions; it means selection of the right people and taking the right decisions in the political field. Basically, it means presentation one's choice in political matters "Political participation refers to those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly and at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or actions they take" (Karl, 1967). Political participation enables ordinary people to enjoy power over rules.

Participation by the common people in the political process of a democratic set-up is very important. But equally important or more important is the way the leaders are involved in the decision making process because leaders have a special role to play in the political system of the country. The leaders have certain scopes available to them which are also available to the common citizens. The leaders have more information, have more

access to political power, more resources and more likely to hold public offices and because of these factors they have greater potentiality to be more instrumental in the political process of the country. Therefore the leaders' participation has its own importance in a democratic polity.

India is considered to be the world's largest democracy but in India, political participation and leadership are the major problems. Even after so many years of independence, full political participation of people is yet to be achieved. The grant of political freedom and adoption of the principle of universal adult franchise have not helped in integrating many people into the democratic system of the country. Though the voting percentage has gradually been increasing it is not up to the expected level. Many people are still outside the rim of the country's political system.

However, what is more alarming is the marginalization of women in the political field, women constitute about half of the country's population but they have never constituted half of the political leadership in the country. They have always occupied less political space than what their numerical strength deserves. Even the percentage of their voting during election is always less than the male percentage. Thus, politically women have been the largest disadvantageous group in the country. The relegation of women into back in the decision – making process has been a disturbing fact and worried the planners, policy executors, social activities, academicians and other interest persons in women issues.

In this scenario, the discussion on political participation and leadership of women assumes greater importance. It is essential that women take interest in the political affairs of the country and come to the mainstream of the political process to make the democratic system more vibrant and successful. Awareness, participation and involvement of women in the political process is necessary to enable them to solve the different problems of the institutions. The potentiality inherent in women would also be utilized in the process of nation building if they become active politically.

But in India, the participation and leadership of women in the political process is dismal. That too at the grass-root level into the PRI's their participation is very less. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act paved the way for increasing the women participation in political process. The occupation of different political positions by women such as posts of Minister, Members of Legislative Bodies like Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, legislative Assemblies of states and local bodies' functionaries is more precarious. Because of this reason there has been an increasing need and demand to involve more and more women into the democratic process of the country especially at the gross root level in PRI's and make them parts of the different decision making bodies.

The participation and leadership of women in general is not very encouraging in India, then the participation and leadership of women in Andhra Pradesh is equally pathetic. In the state, the male participation has always been more than the women participation. In this context the participation and leadership of women Sarpanches at the grass roots institutions makes for an interesting study as the grass roots institutions train the women as leaders and representatives of people and prepare them to shoulder greater responsibilities and play bigger roles in the political system.

In the first place there can be no true democracy, no true people's governance and development without the equal participation of men and women in all spheres of life and levels of decision-making. Secondly the goals of development cannot be attained without, women's full participation not only in the development process but also in shaping its goal. And thirdly women's participation is changing the world in which we live by bringing new priorities and perspectives to the political process and the organization of the society. In raising the status of women and girl children, it will improve the economic and social development of the countries. In changing the unequal balance of decision-making power and control in the relations of men and women in the household, in the work place, in communities, in government and finally in the international arena, it will lead to women's empowerment (Narayan, 1998).

The political status of women in developing countries and levels and quality of their political participation, are far from adequate, considering their share in the population structure, their part in social and economic reproduction as well as their actual and potential role in the national development process. The unfavorable economic and social position of women in developing countries is directly reflected in the level of their participation in the decision-making process at all levels. The founding fathers of free India encouraged greater political participation of women in India's freedom struggle. After independence despite having a constitution which embodies lofty ideals like equality and social justice, these intents are yet to become reality on the societal canvas. The dream of constitution fathers of building up a just socio-economic-political order was pushed to the background due to lack of positive policy initiatives, reluctance on the part of the stronger sex in sharing power with women and silent suffering of the sex (Soysal, 1966).

The term 'participation' is very often used to cover all the forms of action by which citizens take part in the operation of administration (ibid). The word participation is used broadly to refer to the role of members of the general public, as distinguished from that of appointed officials, including civil servants, in influencing the activities of government or in providing directly for community needs. It may occur on any level from village to the country as whole. The participation may be directed, as in community projects and in the work of private welfare organizations, or it may be indirect through elected officials and representatives. In a democratic society, participation gives the ordinary citizen a means of voicing his opinion and of showing by his behaviors and action that he is able to take on responsibilities. It gives the ordinary citizen a chance by other means than periodically exercising his right to vote' (Ali and Ayesha, 1982).

Women and Panchayat:

The system of Panchayati Raj, which was initiated mainly for people's participation in the political and economic processes somehow, has not been successful in ensuring women's participation. The champions of the Panchayati Raj System desired that rural-women should not only become the beneficiaries of development, but more importantly the contributors to it. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was particular that women should find representation in the rural political institutions. Hence it recommended that besides

20 members of the Panchayat Samiti there should be 2 women 'who are interested in work among women and children' as co-opted members (Government of India 1957: 45-52). A similar provision was suggested with regard to the village Panchayat. As a result of this recommendation, a few states did make provision for women's representation. The Maharashtra Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act of 1961, provided for the nomination of one or two women to each of the three bodies, in case no women was elected. The Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishads Act provided for the co-option of two women for each Samitis through the electoral process. In Haryana, there was a provision for the co-option of one women member to the Gram Panchayat, one or two women members to the Panchayat Samit and two women members to the Zila Parishad. States like Punjab and Rajasthan did not straight away adopt co-option but resorted to it, when women did not come through elections. Despite the provision of nomination or co-option, women did not play an effective role in the PRIs. The system of nomination or co-option meant sheer patronage of the dominant political or social groups and the women who got nominated had practically no information on Panchayats not any experience in working for women and children. Women's representation on these bodies came to be symbolized by 'tokenism' and not by a meaningful association' (Mishra and Singh, 1993).

Some states gave up nomination or co-option and resorted to reservation as the only way of ensuring women's representation in the PRIs. The Andhra Pradesh Gram Panchayats Act 1964 provides for reservation of two seats for women if the total strength of Gram Panchayat is 9 or less, 3 seats, if the strength is between 10 and 15 and four seats, if the strength is more than 15 (Bhargava and Vidya, 1992). In other words the Act ensured between 22 to 25 percent representation to women in these bodies. The Karnataka Act provides for the reservation of 25 percent seats for women. In January 1990, Bihar amended its Act and provided for 30 percent reservation of seats for women.

The demand for reservation for women in adequate proportion in the various representative bodies has thus been persistent.

73rd Amendment and Women:

Women's empowerment is one of the major objectives of the third generation of Panchayats in India. As such, the 73rd Amendment Act provides for reservation of one-third of seats for women in the PRIs. The Political Participation and Leadership of Women in PRIs is considered essential not only for ensuring their political participation in the democratic process but also for realizing the developmental goals for women. Participation of women in PRIs involves (1) Women as voters; (2) Women as members of political parties; (3) Women as candidates; (4) Women as elected members of the PRIs taking part in decision-making, planning, implementation and evaluation; and (5) Women as members of Mahila Mandals and their association with voluntary organizations' (George and George, 1994).

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a welcome, though delayed, gesture, for democracy will not be meaningful in a traditional society like India without the full involvement of women and other weaker segments of society. But a constitutional provision is only a necessary and enabling step which should be followed by effective measures for women's uplift in the country (Susheela, 1995).

In the sense of its being an enabling and necessary, though not sufficient, condition for empowerment, the 73rd Amendment is a mile-stone in the way of women assuming leadership and decision-making positions, as it makes such a role mandatory and universal for the whole of India. But it must be remembered that a change cannot be brought about overnight and by legislation alone. The initial reaction to the announcement of reservation for women was one of excitement and happiness on the one hand and anxiety on the other. Even scholars on women's studies and development workers were of the view that finding 8 lakh women to occupy the membership positions for the three tier PRIs by the time elections have to be held all over India would be a difficult task (Laxminarayana, 1985).

The system of Panchayati Raj was expected to usher in a truly democratic set up when once established on the lines expected by its promoters. However the working of Panchayati Raj since 1959 has revealed several shortcomings as well as achievements. The system has not fortified the faith of the people, but has reached a stage of resurrection (Jain and Naidu, 1978).

It is true that Panchayati Raj has brought about some degree of social change. This is achieved both directly and indirectly. A study on the Panchayati Raj and social change sponsored by the Government of Assam pointed out that while there were many variations in the performance of Panchayati Raj from place to place, its main role in changing the socio-economic life of the people could not be denied. There were changes in the value orientations of the people and in the leadership roles. The process of decision-making got accelerated and the value of Panchayati Raj in serving as link between rural masses and the government at higher levels got recognized. Another important achievement of Panchayati Raj is that it increased the consciousness of the people about their rights. Rural people have increasingly become conscious of their social, economic and political rights. Panchayats have contributed to the emergence of new leadership in villages. With the introduction of Panchayati Raj, a number of officials like Block Development Officer, Mukhya Sevika, Gram Sevika, Social Extension Officers in charge of health, education, social welfare and women welfare came into existence. These officials are supposed to play the role of agents of awareness. As the Ashok Mehta Committee appointed by the Government of India in 1977, pointed out, that 'politically speaking it became a process of democratic seed-drilling in the Indian soil by making an average citizen conscious of his rights than before. Administratively speaking, it bridged the gulf between the bureaucratic elite and the people. Sociologically speaking it generated a new leadership which is not merely relatively young in age but also modernistic and pro-social change in outlook. Finally looked at from the developmental angle it helped rural people to cultivate developmental psyche.

There is another perspective which link women only with select developmental issues which have come to be viewed increasingly as women's issues viz., the issues

concerning women and child development, drinking water, fetching fuel and totter, smokeless cooking, health care and nutrition etc. Transforming themselves soon into issues of welfare rather than development, these concerns are mainly related to the domestic performed mostly by women and girls, rather than women's only issues. Even though the beneficiaries of any development in these directions will be both men and women of all ages, it is the welfare angle that development in these directions will reduce the drudgery and time of women and girls, that had made them the women's' issues.

Welfare and development of women constitute important areas for elected women members to play a major role. The danger, however has in women's being restricted to these issues and be excluded from broader socio-economic concerns of the village. This will marginalize the women and restrict their operation and exercise of power. It will, further leave the other issues at the disposal of men; the decision-making process that follows will exclude women's participation, leading to women's concerns not being reflected in the final decisions or their implementation. Whether it is fisheries or social forestry, land improvement or maintenance of community assets, women have an economic interest a social stake, and a positive view. Hence any interpretation of the role of women members will have to include all the areas and believe strongly that all questions are women's and no area or activity of the Panchayats can exclude them. This is particularly valid, since any women could also become the Chairperson (Pradhan) and Vice-Chairperson (Upa-Pradhans).

An enlarged and empowered Panchayat System, with 33 percent membership of women (including one third of total membership of SC/ST) alone can bring home the relevance and meaning of democracy at the local level for women. A participation in the same will throw up effective, experienced and politically trained women leaders from below. The experience of women functioning in many semi-governmental and non-governmental programmes like DWACRA, Mahila Mandals, Mahila Samakhya as well as other programmes have confirmed this belief.

Conclusion

There is a great disparity between women's formal political equality and their actual participation in decision-making processes. It is difficult to the women to take enable where active participation in the decision-making levels. Understandably, it must be at the gross-roots level of the Gram Panchayat and to repeat, the 33 percent reservation for women at all tiers of Panchayat has made a significant beginning and a major contribution. The constitutional provision is only a necessary step which should be followed by effective measures for women's upliftment in the Country. To make women's participation and leadership in politics a reality, enormous work remains to be done given the present socio-economic conditions (Rekha, 2011). In order to get the elected women to function effectively and safeguard the interests of the village and in particular of women and children adequate training and authority have to be provided to them by continuous motivation and awareness procedures of the rich dividends inherent in such empowerment (Ali and Ayesha, 1982). Suitable training programmes need to be developed for them. For promoting adequate development efforts for women at different

levels and creating needed channels for women to participate effectively in decision-making, grass-root level organizations should be promoted. Though the 73rd constitutional amendment act undoubtedly increased the Political Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. But yet much to be done to improve their participation and leadership further more.

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