

Political Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj System – A Historical Study

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Abstract: India was under colonial rule it was only the restricted male member who could vote and contest election while women were totally absent from the political scene. After independence the Indian constitution did not mention or specifically provide reservation for women's representations in the parliament or state assemblies. With the grant of constitutional gender equality in free India came legal support through a series of legislation. Panchayati Raj was introduced in India in 1959, very few women got elected. The Balvantrai Mehta Committee (1957) and Ashoka Mehta committee (1977) recommended that large segment contributing for successful operation of a democratic system special attention should be paid to the role of women in Panchayati institution. In September 1991, Congress government under the leadership of late P.V. Narasimha Rao introduced two separate Bills 72rd Amendment Bill for Municipalities. Article 243 73rd and 74th Amendment to the constitution have been Historic, Characterized as a silent revolution in the national history (Panchayati Raj Institution Act passed in 1993). The Rural Development of infrastructure for Agriculture, road Drinking water, forest Development water conservation, wasteland development rural housing and sanitation horticulture with developing scheme etc.....above the scheme for a changed the total society. Women once upon a time four walls in house but now women participated in PRI's changing and neglected in women's society.

Key Words: Political Participation, Panchayati Raj Institution, Colonial, Rural Development Issues.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the beginning when Panchayati Raj was introduced in India in 1959, very few women contested and got elected. Since independent India has embarked upon comprehensive national development and in this endeavor rural resurgence has got preponderance because of the fact that overwhelming population of India lives in villages and all round problems there are not only pathetic but also more pervasive [1]. From October 2nd, 1959 when the Panchayati Raj System was inaugurated to April 12th, 1993 when the 73rd Amendment Act came into force has been one uncertain and undulating journey of Panchayat. The 73rd Amendment and the XI Schedule have placed a greater emphasis on string thinning the Panchayati Raj Institutions in taking the administration to the door step of the people. The study- team appointed by the Planning Commission Committee on planned projects and was presided over by Blawantrai Mehta which submitted an elaborate report in 1957 [2]. The Mehta study team realizing the importance of popular participation recommended creation of institutions, which were to be statutory, elective, comprehensive in duties and function equipped with necessary executive machinery with adequate resumes and with enough autonomy and freedom. The creation of Panchayati Raj in 1959 with the object of entrusting the authority and responsibility for rural development to rural people was held not only as an innovation but also as an evolution. Tier System (TTs) for Self- Government at the grass-roots level was recommended by the study team and three major tasks viz., development administrative and political, were assigned to these institutions. The basic philosophy behind Panchayati Raj Institutions was to ensure peoples' participation in development programmes which was expected to unleash the arrested process of change and development. In such a situation, and changing scenario at the national level by way of Janta Party coming to power again a committee was appointed under the chairmanship of Ashoka Mehta to suggest ways and means for reviving Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Committee reviewed the past and presented its recommendations having thrust on functional necessity for decentralization of administration. It was called "New Approach to Panchayati Raj"[3].

NEED OF THE STUDY:

The present study is done on women's participation in Panchayat Raj institution. In this study the focus of attention has been concentrated mainly to secure responses from women's representatives of panchayat system about their views regarding their political awareness. Further, this research study has made an enquiry about the extent of women's participation in the Panchayat Raj system, and to further analyze and estimate

the type of role, which women play in Panchayat Raj system. This study also made an attempt to understand the problems faced by the women with reference to their participation in panchayat Raj Institution. Finally, the researcher has undertaken this study from a social work perspective. Hence implication for social work practice in the enhancement of the role of women in Panchayat Raj Institution has been a major focus. Thus the present study tries to understand women's political participation in the contemporary scenario. particularly women representatives at the grass root level of decentralized political system and what best can be done to boost their competencies, skills and knowledge to facilitate their extensive participation in the political institution at their own might [4].

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION:

The panchayat raj is a South Asian political system mainly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. It is the oldest system of local government in the Indian subcontinent. The word "panchayat" literally means "assembly" (ayat) of five (punch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the local community. However, there are different forms of assemblies [5].

WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ:

Women are changing the governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in an unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the constitution that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments. In India, we call this new system the Panchayat Raj Institution System (PRI)

PARTICIPATION:

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has defined participation from a broader perspective that, "participation is a collective sustained activity for the purpose of achieving some common objectives, especially a more equitable distribution of the benefits of development". Article 243 of the amended Constitution defines a panchayat as "an government for the rural areas" [6].

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POST - COLONIAL INDIA:

Hindu Dharma Shastras and customs had already saved the way for their complete subordination to male through deprivation of property rights, worship of husband as God, dowry, and sati systems. The Mohammedan rule confined upper caste women to their homes and early marriages were preferred. The British rule contributed a lot for emancipation of women. Unless women were made aware of what was happening in the outside world, they could not believe that their emancipation was possible. By the turn of twenty-first century, aspirations of educated women and their leaders enlarged to cover political participation. By the time of the First World War the women movement began to be feminist throughout India. A demand for women's franchise was initiated in 1917 when a deputation of Indian women led by Sarojini Naidu presented a demand before the British Parliament for enfranchisement of women on the basis of equality with men. The Reforms Act of 1921 enfranchised a small section of the Indian population including women. Women's right to vote was subject to qualifications of possession of "wifehood", property and education. A meeting of representative women's organizations drafted a memorandum demanding adult franchise without sex discrimination. The electoral rules had, however, been so framed that any Provincial Legislative Council could franchise them if they thought fit. Madras and Bombay took advantage of this rule and women were granted them franchise in 1923. Three years later central provinces, West Bengal and Punjab also followed. Thus, by 1929 all provincial legislatures had given them right to vote. In 1926 women were, for the first time, eligible for being members of the legislatures and in 1927 Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was nominated as the first woman member of Provincial Legislative Council of Madras and was chosen to be the Deputy President. There was no elected women member in Provincial Council or Assembly. Women had not yet been made eligible for membership of Council of States (the second chamber at the Centre). Mrs. Poonam Lakhose became Minister of State in Travancore Government. In 1931, the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress took the historic decision of committing itself to political equality of women, regardless of their status and qualifications. The Government of India Act 1935 paved the way for women (above age 21) with property and education to exercise franchise deleting the condition of marriage. Besides legislature women also became members (elected or nominated) of local bodies such as municipalities, district and local boards. Thus, during British Rule country witnessed unprecedented awakening in women. They were also active members of Congress, the main political party.

Several women had excellent role in freedom struggle establishing beyond doubt that they were in no way inferior to men, if proper atmosphere was provided to them. So far as politics is concerned their participation in large scale started during freedom struggle. In "Salt Agitation" they outnumbered men. Freedom struggle also produced some great women leaders who are a source of inspiration for the coming generations. They have been more successful politicians than their male counterparts. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Mridula Sarabhai, Durgabai Deshmukh, Padmaja Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, Vijay Laxmi Pandit, Sucheta Kriplani, Indira Gandhi all have proved that women do not lag behind even in politics [7].

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AFTER INDEPENDENCE:

Finally, the Constitution of India, in 1950, pledged the nation to achieving a just society based on the principles of equality and dignity of the individual, and proclaimed the right to political and legal equality as fundamental rights of all Indians. The guarantee against discrimination in employment and office under the state opened the revenues to offices of power and dignity [8]. After enactment of the constitution and its enforcement the first step for rural upliftment was the emphasis in community development projects in 1952. The result has not been so encouraging as they ought to be. To a great extent this was so because no efforts were made to secure sufficient participation of women in a responsible manner. The institutions of local self-government were also not properly organized and they suffered from certain drawbacks including absence of women's effective participation. During Janta Party regime a committee was constituted at national level under the chairmanship of Ashoka Mehta in December 1977. The committee suggested that as a large segment contributing for successful operation of a democratic system, special attention should be paid to the role of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. In September 1991, Congress government under the leadership of late P.V. Narasimha Rao introduced two separate Bills- Seventy-second Amendment Bill for Panchayats and Seventy-third Amendment Bill for Municipalities. They were referred to Joint Select Committee of Parliament and were ultimately passed as Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendment Bills in December, 1992. The President gave his assent in April 24, 1993 as Constitution (Seventy - third Amendment) Act, 1993 for Panchayats and on June 1, 1993 the Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992 for urban local bodies. The significance of these amendments is to be seen not merely in decentralized power sharing but in the cession of power to women, assigning space for not less than one-third of the membership in the Panchayats and their presidencies for women and in proportion to their population for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Holding of periodic elections to the local bodies has been made mandatory as well so that there is democratic renewal of reservations from time to time. These amendments have also provided for reservation of offices of chairpersons to ensure their effective role in decision making process. 73rd and 74th Amendments were made in the Constitution in the light of women's role in freedom struggle and observations of our veteran leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Jaiprakash Narain and Indira Gandhi who tested them before and after obtaining independence [9].

RURAL DEVELOPMENT, WOMEN AND PRIS:

It is quite obvious that planning often leads to development while writing on development one another distinguishes between "Imposed development" and "Self determined development" where development has been imposed, it has resulted in dominance, dependence and exploitation. Rural development is a process of social transformation. Rural development programs aim at the improvement of the rural poor's living standard by providing them opportunities for fullest utilization of their potential through their active participation in the process of goal-oriented change. The goal of development consists in the enrichment of the total quality of the life and its availability to all sections of the community. Rural people through to all sections of the community. Rural people through Panchayati Raj bodies get a scope to transform their expectations into reality and in the process political power so as to channelize their demands for collective mobilization and community [10].

The India Development Report (1990-2000) analyzing the means to bring an end to persisting poverty and social insecurity states, "there has been a lot of emphasis on decentralization of governance and people's participations in India." These are important for financial sustainability of anti-poverty programs. Decentralizing governance from capital cities to towns and villages can be one of the best means of promoting participations and efficiency. Local officials and politicians can be much more open to public security than national government and more accountable to the communities and individuals they are supposed to serve. The financial sustainability of the programs in turn also improves people's participations. They feel that they are not dependent on doles or charities. Swami Nathan draws up three steps for planning at local level:

1. Compilation of an integrated resources inventory.
2. Preparation of draft action plans.
3. Undertaking a malady/remedy analysis and selecting appropriate Programs with the involvement of local community.

Rural India is marked by various shortcomings which hinder the facilitation of democracy. These are: high rate of illiteracy, distrust between the various segments of the society based on caste, religion, class, language, etc., lack of political awareness and consciousness. These factors give rise to conflicts among people and hamper the collective action based on consensus, within the Panchayats and simultaneously sharpens the political contestation. Local level planning would be effective only when there are three pre-requisites: (1) a viable people's organization with dynamic leadership; (2) close co-operation and coordination between people's institutions and government agencies and (3) adequate knowledge and understanding of why, what and how of local level planning. The transfer of technology and technical up gradation of existing capital structure of village India is essential for promotion of efficiency and productivity. A separate agency has been created at the apex level known as Council for Advancement and Peoples Action for Rural Technology (CAPART) which assists voluntary action in a read of rural development. It is the central agency, which serves on funds, which are allocated by the DW CRA, TRYSEM, JRY and IRDP [11]. Development of infrastructure for agriculture, horticulture cottage-level industrial and service skill is the necessity and after Political Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj....eight plans special efforts are done in desert areas, hill areas, drought prone areas, and the tribal areas to provide the basic amenities, institutions and infrastructure. Minor irrigation, soil conservation, water storage, social forestry, school buildings, health centers, livestock centers, etc., are the basic areas of emphasis self-help and public participation have been specially cared for yet the alertness and consciousness among masses have not emerged and most of the things depend on manipulation by the officials.

The report of the government development programmers in village masses is quite low and villagers treat it as paper-based work for the official of the government. Even the public representatives and officials are highly critical of the design of the programmers. The inflexibility in these schemes are the main drawback which reduces every work to mere paper-work. The areas where the priority should be given relate to solid conservation, forest development, water conservation, wasteland development, roads, rural housing and sanitation. The poverty alleviation programmers should nicely be tailored with rural development schemes [12]. The main problem today is to generate funds required for financing such investment on a large scale (small doses will not help and in fact would wash away) and for this the hidden surplus in the rural economy need to be tapped by suitable design of incentive-cum-taxation policies that are politically implementable [13]. This would require a decentralized administrative mechanism where participation by the local people would monitor the mobilization of local resources and their uses, including marketing of the products such that the real gains of globalization induced expansion in agricultural activity may accrue to the tillers of the soil and the real wage rate of the agricultural laborers could be argumentated so as to reduce the degree of rural inequality [14]. This would require orientation of the village's level institutions so that people's empowerment, gender equality and access to hidden resources could be realized. It is therefore necessary that a careful planning and monitoring of the poverty alleviation schemes spread across state is undertaken by a central expert agency endowed with detailed information and these are properly targeted which the beneficiaries can directly monitor that successful implementations of the schemes and the wastage could be plugged. All these would require careful management of the rural institutions of planning, finance and targeting of our poverty administrations, which must be development in different states in the coming ear to meet the new challenges of globalization spreading to India's rural economy [15]. Women, who constitute half of the population, could not be neglected for long. Their exclusion from mainstream of social and political life is bound to create hindrances in the development process, and prosperity of the nation is bound to be adversely affected. They must, therefore, have a fair representation in political and administrative structure at all levels, so as to ensure due power sharing. In the present conditions of the social set-up reservation for weaker sex was inevitable to push them through. Without reservation the reluctant lot of women, who remained suppressed for centuries, cannot come out to have their share in power. The reservation alone can, however, not solve the problems. It may rather create its own problems. It is, therefore necessary to examine all aspects which affect participation of women in political process [16].

SOME IMPORTANT ISSUES / DRAWBACKS WHICH AFFECT THE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS:

Education is certainly necessary for awareness among women and their effective participation, but it alone is not the determining factor. There are many other factors which affect their awareness and participation. Education is more helpful in generating awareness provided she has inclination to know and has means to get the required literature or training. These things are not so difficult to overcome as other factors which affect their effective participation even if she desires to. These are the following issues which hurdle the active participation of the women in Panchayat Raj Institutions [17].

- The first and most important hurdle is purdah system. They do not want to come out of home, rather they are hesitant because of this centuries old traditions.
- This along with ego of males is mainly responsible for representation by proxy even where the member is literate. [18]
- They are also unable to participate because of the pressure of the domestic work including bringing up of children. Men do not want to share. They feel it below dignity to share the household work.[19]
- There is so much criminalization of politics that not only women even educated and honest men also do not want to go in politics. Often we see in headlines of newspapers murders, kidnapping, abductions, rape and molestation. Generally, Women of such families contest elections who have got to face the criminals [20].

Independent thinking and impartial decisions are qualities of a good representative and they are possible only when woman is not dependent upon others for livelihood [21]. Even if a woman has independent earning it is not an easy task for a woman in our society to revolt against the wishes of her family. Those, who have earnings of their own, prefer to live with comfort with their family instead of facing odds of political life [22]. Even so this is an important factor. A woman with independent earning will be more independent in decision-making process than those who depend upon others, provided she has will to do so. It can, therefore, be concluded that independent earnings are essential for active participation and impartial decision-making process but to bring women in forefront something more is required. She must have interests in politics and courage to face the public [23]

II. CONCLUSION:

It can be concluded that with the 73rd Amendment women participation has increased. But mere participation is not efficient when they are not given proper rights. Political rights are given to the women but still there is no adequate representation of women in the political sphere. Very few women dare to venture in this field except those who come from politician families and have necessary political exposure. In Panchayat, women are only proxy members because of lack of education. Because of illiteracy most elected women have no idea, as to what being an elected member really means, just do what the mental them to do. Illiterate women cannot take autonomous decisions. They are bound to be dictated by educated and crafty male members of their family, in the background. The elected educated women lack the required confidence because they do not know what their right as village administration are the issue being one of awareness. The other point is that community does not perceive the women as capable of worthy of leaderships. The attitude of rural people towards women as political leader is yet to undergo significant change. Elected women have become the victims of exploitation, violence and harassment. Ashok Metha points out that as far as women participation in the Panchayati Raj is concerned it is not up to mark, mere reservation will not solve the problem unless women are given commensurate powers effectively. A study in the state of Tamil Nadu has shown that many women elected to the local/ Panchayats are surrogates for husbands and father who could not contest because of reservation some were put in place by the wealthy and powerful, for their malleability- a kind of puppet to tame the vested interest while appearing to be an elected representative. The present study makes a sincere effort to understand the political participation of women and to find out the political awareness among women representatives in Panchayat Raj Institution and to analyze the role of women in Panchayat Raj system, to understand the problems faced by the women with reference to their participation in Panchayat Raj institution, and to explore the role of professional social worker in the enhancement of role of women in Panchayat Raj institution. These served as a motivational factor and encouraged the researcher to take up the research work in this area.

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