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Decentralization And Participatory Democracy– Women In Panchayati Raj Institutions

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Abstract

This research paper aims to highlight India's vision of entering into 2047 as a VIKASIT BHARAT with inclusive approach. India plans to march on its journey of completing 100 years of independence with an inclusive approach. This paper highlights the efforts government has been taking for improving women's participation in the politics and policy making at grass root level. Decentralization of power in India can be traced back to Chola period. Gandhiji through his idea of Gram Swaraj further popularized the concept of democratic decentralization. But any nation could not succeed without participation of half of its population i.e. women who constitute a major portion of the population. Without including them in the process seems like leaving half of the population behind. For ensuring participation of the women in the democratic process government introduced 73rd Amendment Act to the constitution providing reservation for the women in the Panchayati Raj System. But this is not without challenges. Illiteracy, backward mindset, male domination and cultural barriers are difficult to break. With help of Government increase in literacy, social changes and changing dimension of society India would definitely march into 2047 as an egalitarian society and gender equality with equal distribution of power beyond caste.

Keywords: Democracy, Panchayati Raj System, politics, governance, women

Introduction

Development of any society requires participation of people from all section of society. In our country where more than half of rural population lives below poverty line ensuring their participation in local level governance specially women is imperative for assuring all round development of rural society. Panchayati Raj System provide such a platform where people from lowest unit of social structure could participate in the process of nation building.

Panchayati Raj System like local governance has been in India during Chola period also. Later popularized by Mahatma Gandhi in his concept of Gram Swaraj to replace the old feudal system where local level zamindars and people of influential group ruled. In its place a new system of development and administration was proposed where people participated in the administration of their development. The Panchayati Raj Institutions are considered as local self-government for solving local problem, providing basic infrastructure facilities and initiate development at grassroots level.

PRIs are third tier of government. They not only give people at local level power, responsibilities and accountabilities but also play an important role in harnessing, channelizing and realizing energies of people for bringing social transformation where every number make their own contribution in social, economic and political life of country.

PRIs provide an opportunity to people at local level and also acts as a platform to politically educate and train people at local level. It provides an opportunity to every member of society to be a part of nation

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bleeding by providing their role at grassroots level. It trains them in political activities like community works, impart social values, improve leadership abilities and make them accountable and efficient.

The 73rd Amendment of the constitution made provision for reservation of seats and positions in the three tiers for woman and reservation of seats for SC/ST in proportion to their population in all the positions of the three tiers. This provision has created scope for women to exercise their political rights in local governance. Thus this amendment provided voice to those who were most affected by the decisions by allowing them to participate in the decision making process, voice their opinion and help form policies beneficial for them. Participation in PRI s allows women to be a part of decision making viz planning formulation, implementation, monitoring evaluation & sharing benefits of development. According to Benninger "Peoples participation" may be described as taking part in the events taking place in a community or large area. For ensuring overall development of society women's participation is a must because without having voice of half of the population no goals could be achieved and development could not be called holistic. For this purpose government has worked hard to increase the participation of women in the development process. As a result by 2025 women contribute over 46% of elected members with around 14 lakh to 15 lakhs across 2.63 lakh Panchayats .

States like Bihar, Orissa, Uttarakhand, Himanchal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala have implemented 50% reservations to women in PRIs. The reservation enhances the women's capacity to influence the decision in their favour at Panchayat level. Women elected to Panchayat particularly in Gram Panchayat can be innovative and creative in thinking, enterprising in taking up welfare activities for the development of villages.

It has been found that women led Panchayats often prioritize health, sanitation and drinking water leading to better social welfare outcomes. But despite having several incidences of women working efficiently and effectively which has ensured betterment for weaker section of society especially women, children and SC/ST classes, it is not without challenges. Women representation has definitely increased and they are setting example by their innovation, empathy and hard work but challenges remain; most prominent being male members of the elected women's family and male members of villages Panchayat not cooperating and discriminating women due to their gender. The pradhans sometimes do not share all the information with female members. But the scenario is now changing with increase in education level among women many highly educated women with rural background choose to work for the welfare of their community at grassroot level.

To sight example of women efficiently working at grassroot level we have Chharu Rajavat an MBA graduate who became Sarpanch of Soda village, Rajasthan. With her skills she worked to tackle the water problem in water deficient area. She improved water management system, promoted rainwater harvesting, brought better infrastructure and sanitation.

Aarti Devi of Odisha, a former bank officer become sarpanch and focused on women's self help groups (SHG) and improved digital literacy among villagers.

Razia Begum of Uttar Pradesh worked towards building toilets under Swachh Bharat Mission.

These are only a few example. It is notable that women by virtue of their leadership position in PRIs are playing pro-active role and taking steps to address needs of women.

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The participation of women in PRIs has given more opportunity to voice their view, bring their priorities to focus and express their problems in the forum of decision making at grass-root level.

The women leadership that emerged through PRIs have to face several problem due to tradition social condition. Traditional social structure dominated by males was reluctant to share power with females. Thus the social structure, attitude and traditional practice are creating blockade in the growth of women leaders at grass-root level. Increase in literacy and more and more participation could only bring attitude change among people that women should have equal opportunity in the process of nation building.

Studies done by Neeti Mahanti on the tribes of North-eastern states of India has found that tribal women have not involved in any decision making forum in these states. Even highly literate females are experiencing a lot of resistance for political participation and their empowerment.

Studies on women participation in PRIs indicate that women elected apart from access to information and education require more sportive attitude both at home Panchayats. Providing reservation to the women is not sufficient. They have to face a lot of reluctance and opposition from family and society due to traditional social conditioning. In many areas it is a common practice when seat is reserved for women, men use them as proxy candidate to keep the reserved seats.

The efforts to increase participation of women women's like providing reservation and encouraging participation has definitely improved their numbers in panchayat bodies. Key factors for improving their participation include support of family members, husbands in most of the cases, government polices and Panchayat Raj officials.

But still women are not encouraged to take up higher position and most of the time are forced to work as dummy candidate. They have to face racial and caste discrimination also. With improvement in educational and financial levels and support of society they can definitely play a crucial role in local governance at grass-root level.

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