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Role of Women in Gram Panchayat

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ABSTRACT: Panchayats have been the backbone of grassroot democracy in the Indian villages since its beginning. Gandhi had aptly favoured the panchayati raj and his dream got translated with the passage of the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 (or simply the Panchayati Raj Act), which introduced the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to ensure people's participation in rural reconstruction in general and that of women in particular. It came into force with effect from April 24, 1993.

Provisions for women in the Act

- The Act provides for the reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women (including the number of seats reserved for the SCs and STs).
- Further not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women. This would be rotated among different Panchayats at each level.

KEYWORDS: women, gram panchayat, democracy, reconstruction, reservation, amendment, constitution

I. INTRODUCTION

We must remember that empowerment as a process is slow but self-perpetuating. Providing women with opportunities and support systems (such as reservations & other affirmative action) has the potential to put into motion a sustainable process for a change in gendered power relations allowing them to slowly but steadily break the shackles of existing boundaries.

Role of Women in Panchayats

- Participation in election: The Act provides for the reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women. It is an attempt to ensure greater participation of women in election process directly and indirectly. It would be the nursery of creating women politicians for national politics. Even the participation of common women citizens in various activities such as attending Gram Sabha meeting, etc. has reportedly increased (68-78 percent).[1]
- Participation in rural development: Women are actively participating in rural development as per their capacity right from labourers to policy-makers.
- Participation in decision-making: The participation of women as elected as well as non-elected members are rising due to reservation for women. It acts as pull factor for women to participate in meeting. They give their suggestions for various works and problems faced by them.
- Agent of social revolution: Women are acting as an agent of change in the society and raising voice against injustice and atrocities.
- Reducing corruption and violence: Due to women representatives nexus of officers and male elected representatives are breaking, which has a direct impact on reducing corruption. The role of local muscle power has substantially reduced due to active participation and awareness of women about their rights and power.
- Reduction in violence against women: Domestic violence has substantially declined due to women pradhan or surpanch. These women representatives take pro-actively take up such violence. The victims also feel free to share their grievances to women representatives.
- Reduction in violence against Dalits: The dominance of upper caste patriarchy are substantially declined, hence the shackles of caste is subsiding.
- Practising participatory democracy: Growing participation of marginalised section in general and women in particular, is transforming our democratic setup from representative democracy to participatory democracy.[2]

Difficulties faced by women representatives in PRS

- Political intervention in the functioning of Panchayats.
- Women act as proxies for men.
- Husband's intervention of elected woman in her functioning.
- Lack of political awareness among the women in rural areas.
- Negative public opinion regarding women's leadership capacity.
- Illiteracy or low standard of education among the women in rural areas is a stumbling bloc.
- Lack of training courses especially for women representatives.
- Dominance of elected male members of the Panchayat.
- Politically motivated violence against women have seen an increase.

Suggestions for effective participation of women in Panchayati Raj System

- Political parties intervene in the election and functioning of Panchayats, creates hostile environment for the women contestants and women representatives. The government should take a strict action in such an intervention of political parties and elections should be conducted free and fair.
- In rural areas political awareness among the women is negligible. It is the duty of the state government and local administration to educate the women about the political issues and create awareness among them.
- Special training and refresher courses for women representatives should be conducted from time-to-time. It gives them confidence and creates political awareness and power.
- Government should make special provisions for the women representatives and give them more powers as compared to male counterparts and educate them about their powers. It helps them to work efficiently and effectively.
- There should be a provision to give honour and financial rewards to the women members for their exemplary works.
- The rotation term of reserved seats should be made after every atleast 10years. It would help women representatives to fix their feet in the panchayats.

Implications

- With the establishment of PRIs in our country a woman gets an opportunity to prove her worth as a good administrator, decision-maker or a good leader. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a milestone in this regard. It provides women a chance to come forward.
- This experiment is proving to be a big success particularly by providing opportunity to women to come out of their houses and participate in administrative and political field.
- However, in many areas of our country this system has been captured by some elite people. The government should provide extra financial, administrative or political assistance to women for the success of the provision of the Amendment.
- Government should encourage research and development in effective implementation of provisions of 73rd amendment.

II. DISCUSSION

Decentralising power at the grassroots; level was on the national agenda for many years. It became a reality through the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution in April 1993. The 73rd amendment, among other things, handed over the reins of power to the people at the panchayat level with a 33 per cent reservation of certain seats and key positions within the panchayat to women. The amendment also made it mandatory for all states to hold gram panchayat and municipal elections and empowered these bodies to undertake development activities at the local level.[3]

About three years after women started occupying the seats of power, changes can already be seen. Many panchayats have performed well despite financial constraints. On an average, around Rs 200 per person reaches every gram panchayat (Rs 1.5 lakh per gram panchayat in Haryana, Rs 2.3 lakh in Himachal Pradesh Rs 90,000 in Uttar Pradesh, Rs 6.5 lakh in Madhya Pradesh, Rs 66 lakh in Kerala) to undertake development work in the village. Since most of this

money to panchayats is already tied and committed for certain infrastructure and other development activities, panchayats do not have much autonomy in defining the programme priorities. However, the Kerala's People's Plan (KPP) allots, on an average, Rs 30 lakh per gram panchayat for unlisted projects giving scope for local initiative. While the 73rd amendment has opened the way for women to exercise their right to be involved in village governance, it does not let them define programme priorities and develop and manage natural resources. Nor is there an integrated approach to environmental planning at a microlevel because each department has its own plan. The KPP attempts to rectify this.

Now that women's participation in panchayats is slowly and surely making an impact on grassroots governance, it can be said that the foundations have been laid to extend this social revolution to all levels of decision - making. Women constitute only 6.7 per cent of the total seats in Parliament. The emerging feedback from women-ruled panchayats should hopefully help evolve a consensus in favour of reserving seats for women in Parliament.

Women in panchayats: the Impact Perhaps the most significant aspect of the entry of women into provincial politics is that many social myths are beginning to be shattered. Those who were initially cynical about the induction of women into the roles of power had argued that women would be forced to serve as dummies for their husbands. They felt that, one way or other, women would be unable to exercise powers as administrators either because of her own ignorance or other limitations imposed on her by domestic duties. Even in states like West Bengal and Kerala, where politicisation of the lower levels had already taken place, the general impression was that women would be mere rubber stamps.

"By and large, women sarpanchs or members attend panchayat or block level meetings by themselves and are not represented by their male relatives," says Chandan Dutta of the Delhi-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), Participatory Research in Asia. There has also been a perceptible improvement in administration at the gram panchayat level mainly because women sarpanchs hold meetings during the day and no dubious deals are struck late at night. They are also more accessible than men who are often not around. Due to these factors there is much more honesty and transparency in local administrative matters.[4]

Vignettes obtained from villages across the country about the way these women are functioning in are quite encouraging. In Kanthipad village in West Bengal's Midnapore district, Uma Maiti stood up against corruption in allocation of funds under the Indira Awas Yojana Programme. A handicapped person, Ratna Roy Choudhury of the same village fought for and obtained funds under the same scheme. "Can you call a woman like Tahmina Bibi, who has hardly any formal education, a rubber stamp when she stood against the men in her panchayat of Barogharia village in north Bengal and insisted on the construction of a culvert?" asks Seema Chatterjee who works for an NGO. At a gram panchayat meeting in Kolar district of Karnataka, a woman member suggested some measures on where to buy land and this helped the panchayat save Rs 20,000.

Women are also making substantial contributions in giving suggestions for raising educational standards, addressing water sanitation and fuel problems - areas which were generally not discussed by men. A woman panchayat member from Yavatol district of Maharashtra organised a camp for women to discuss issues like dowry and also convinced women to implement improved stove and biogas systems.

Though issues relating to natural resources are not getting the attention they deserve, due mainly to the fact that most of the issues are outside the ambit of the panchayats, there are exceptions. The women pradhan of Kashlog near Darlaghat in Himachal Pradesh, for instance, has opposed limestone mining by Ambuja Cements in the area. According to L B j V Subrahmanyam, director, panchayats, in Hamirpur, the programme of planting fodder plants is picking up in Himachal villages with the help of funds diverted from the Employment Assurance Scheme. Says Kulbhushan Upmanyu, an activist in Chamba, "Mahila mandals all over Himachal have responded to the scarcity by planting and protecting small patches of forests near villages."

Because of the increasing awareness among women of their potential, they are slowly gaining the confidence to overcome social stigmas. Kantibai Dhurve, a disabled adivasi (tribal) woman in the Savalkheda gram panchayat of Madhya Pradesh, was elected as president by 273 votes even though seven men had opposed her. In the last four years, Kantibai has been instrumental in the construction of a road in the village apart from setting up many handpumps. "If the government helps us we can do much more." Kantibai says.

That is a perennial problem. But many women are not offering any such excuses. Saroj Rana, the first woman pradhan



of the Siyoni block panchayat of Uttarkashi district, has constructed a school and a road for her block panchayat. More important, Rana stopped the long established tradition by which the money the panchayat got under the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana was given to the contractor who built substandard structures. This way both the pradhan and the contractor stashed away part of the funds. Rana, however, has changed all this. Whenever money is allotted, Rana calls all the villagers and announces her plans openly. She has also developed a new way of distributing money meant for development activities. The panchayat block has six villages and Rana has decided to give the whole amount allotted to one particular village, instead of breaking it into six segments for six villages. This way a substantial amount is available for every village in turn. A major impact of women on local politics has been the role they have played in controlling the stranglehold of liquor in most village communities. "We have been successful in closing down two thekas (liquor vends) during the last year. Both these thekas were in panchayats led by women. The pradhans were with us in the struggle," says Soma Devi president of the informal federation of mahila mandals in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh. In many states were women led anti-liquor movements, the support for these can be traced back directly to panchayati raj institution where women held key positions.[5]

Initial reports from women-run panchayats seem to suggest that they are more convincing and effective than men in the fight to check corruption at the grassroots level. Majah Wankhede, sarpanch of the village Metikhede in Maharashtra's Yavatmal district, says: "Getting elected was not difficult, what was difficult was what we had to deal with after getting elected, particularly dealing with government officials." According to her, the block development officer demanded one tin sheet from each one of the 40 boxes they bought. In spite of facing such demands at every level of her dealings with the government, Wankhede built toilets in the school building, 40 biogas plants and provide smokeless chullahs (stoves) to many houses. She suspended two gramsevakas on charges of corruption in spite of a warning from the block development officer that she would get a terrible reputation if she insisted on suspending workers. "I retorted that the next person I would suspend would be him," says Wankhede.

III. RESULTS

Yet, like any major social transformation, women who have shown the courage to take their destiny into their own hands have had to surmount hindrances at every stage. Fatima Suhra, a primary school teacher who was elected as president of the Puthige panchayat of Kasargode district in Kerala, was not allowed to function by the local unit of Communist Party of India-Marxist (cpm) which in fact had sponsored her as their candidate. The party put up a sub-committee to oversee panchayat affairs and started dictating terms to Suhra who rightly refused. The local unit of the cpm ordered social ostracism against her, a lethal strategy in the Muslim-dominated region of Malabar in north Kerala. Suhra finally resigned. "I was on the side of justice," she said after she was forced to resign.

The establishment of panchayati raj systems since the 90s has enhanced substantial thrust to the course of decentralisation and has a greater implication on India's system of governance. With the evolution of the democratic process, the traditional community's metamorphosis has always been linked with disputes. In 1992, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment gave the panchayats the status of local self-government; they are implemented to ensure economic progress and social justice is carried out. These institutions look forward to elevating infrastructural amenities, authorising the weaker sections to commence the development process in rural India. In contemporary times, panchayati raj's concept is occasionally laced with a political agenda for strategic and economic reasons. Panchayati raj's institutions have been benevolent in recognising actual beneficiaries to obtain paramount advantage out of these schemes. However, various components such as casteism, factionalism, and rivalries hamper these institutions' performance. The failure to identify these hurdles and deficiencies have led to subsequent problems in its implementation. The study gives an overview of the origin, composition, and various issues within this intuition. In addition, it aims to identify the roles of women in the existing patriarchal society and its ardent influence threatening the very shackles of democracy. It is truly a vision our father of the nation envisaged bringing out the essence of democracy through people's power.

The idea of local government has been prominent in India since the ancient period. History has showcased that there exist some traces of Village Panchayats in the form of village communities. Over the years, invaders have established and ravaged empires; however, these villages have preserved their identities. Villages were considered an economic and an administrative unit; the village headmen were recognised as government representatives.

Panchayati Raj Institutions have played a pivotal role in transforming the socio-economic dimensions of rural India. The effectiveness of these bodies is determined based on the communities' active involvement, contribution, and participation. It is significant for achieving human welfare through 'Social Justice' and 'Empowerment of weaker

sections based on various development initiatives. Through active engagement, the democratic principles and notions of decentralisation paved the way to the process of nation-wide development can be achieved through the working of an effective system of local government. The notion of 'Gram Swaraj' as envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi is the true spirit of democracy. It is now instrumental in the development and rural reconstruction. [6]

Good governance consists of a structure that allows the government to provide services to citizens and generate resources and revenue for societal development. Progress and growth can be attained by the engagement of the various stakeholders in the development process. The development will commence and start primarily in the village. Gandhiji famously stated, "If India is not to perish, we have to begin with a lower rung of the ladder. If that was rotten, all work done at the top of the intermediate level was bound to fall ultimately." Gandhiji advocated the need for decentralisation and liberation of the villages from exploitation.

The expression 'Panchayat' connotes an assembly of five elderly leaders elected by the local community. Mahatma Gandhi, in 1946 had stated that Indian independence must commence at the grass-root level. Gandhiji's vision has been transformed into reality with the commencement of a three-tier Panchayati Raj system that enables people's participation in rural reconstruction. Panchayat Raj signifies democratic decentralisation and appointment of local self-government at different levels: village, block, and District levels. Rural development and growth require uplifting the socio-economic status of the rural population on a sustainable basis through ideal usage of local resources, both natural and human. The spirit of progress and expansion is not in 'providing' but in 'promoting' the rural sector. Therefore, the principal notion of rural development should be self-reliance. Gandhi has always promoted self-sufficiency and self-reliance of the village community and highlighted the need to utilise local resources for development purposes effectively. Villages should strive to achieve total self-sufficiency, especially with regards to basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, health, etc. Various committees such as Malaviya Committee (1956), Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), Ashok Mehta Committee (1978), Hanumantha Rao Committee (1983), G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985), Singhvi Committee (1986), etc., have analysed and examined the development, functioning, autonomy, freedom, weaknesses, and remedial measures for consolidating the system of Panchayati Raj. Rural development has been a significant concern for policy planners since the 1950s. In 1952, the Community Development Programme (CDP) was initiated. It was a programme introduced for rural reconstruction. It is outlined based on rural life being an organic whole, and no development in any sector was feasible unless a simultaneous attack was made on all sectors. However, due to the lack of people's participation and initiative, the CDP had failed to achieve its objectives.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee identified the requirement for initiating democratic institutions at the foundation level called panchayat to ensure people's engagement in executing rural development programmes.

Further, the Ashoka Mehta committee had been commissioned to understand the role of panchayat raj and the means to achieve accelerated growth and rural development. The committee gave several recommendations for the growth and expansion of the panchayat raj system in India, primarily based on decentralisation principles. One of the significant suggestions by the Ashoka Mehta committee was the formation of constitutional status for the panchayat raj systems. In 1966, India adopted a new plan of action for agricultural development and reforms based on the usage of high yielding varieties of wheat and paddy supported by a policy of remunerative prices to the farmers. This policy is outlined on the basis that the lack of economic growth embeds poverty. Over the years, the essence of the Panchayati Raj System as an effective instrument for people's participation has been emphasised by the reflection of several committees such as the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in 1957, Ashok Mehta Committee in 1977 and much more, after years of deliberations the 73rd Amendment to the constitution came in 1992. With this huge development, this Amendment provided the foundational constitutional framework for democracy at the grass-root level. [7]

The Panchayath Raj system is a three-tier structure it consists of i) Zilla Panchayath ii) Taluk Panchayath iii) Gram Panchayath. Strengthening the institutions of Panchayati raj and economic reforms have been crucial policy development since the 1990s. Both of these aspects are essential for the advancement and progress of our society, providing easy access to services to the community. The need for local self-governance at the foundational level has paved the way to the 73rd and 74th constitutional Amendments.



The XIth Schedule of the Constitution states the power and authority of the panchayat that may enable the functions of these institutions. These laws equip for the devolution of powers and responsibilities upon Panchayats to achieve economic development and social justice and execute the schemes entrusted to them. It must be noted that the term for panchayat is five years from the date of appointment and commencement of their first meeting unless dissolved sooner.

Issues

Absence of Conceptual Clarity

The deficiency in understanding the role, concept and the primary objectives the members of the panchayat are intended to fulfil. For some, it is merely an administrative agency; for others, it is a charter of rural local government. This lack of clarity could hamper the effectiveness of the process, subsequently leading to confusion and ambiguity.

Lack of Computer-based knowledge and Infrastructure

In some instances, the lack of skills in relation to computer usage leads to quick diminishing standards of efficient working. The government initiated the e-panchayat project in about 360-gram panchayats. However, these districts lack infrastructure and have poor broadband internet connectivity. The project of e-governance is to provide citizen-centric services electronically, maintain a database on the assets of the gram panchayats, and effortlessly access gram panchayat data and services transparently.

Poor Coordination among Different Administrative Bodies

There is a deficiency of proper cooperation and coordination between the people and the officials. In addition, the Gram Pradhans experience shortcomings due to poor coordination among different administrative bodies. The failure of officials to perform their duty effectively and efficiently has resulted in delayed developmental activities and underutilization of funds. Furthermore, The Panchayati Raj bodies experience several administrative hurdles such as politicization of the local administration, absence of coordination and differences between the popular and bureaucratic officials, lack of good opportunities, promotions and incentives for those involved in the administration etc.

Proxy Presence: Female Gram Pradhans

Previously, women who were assumed to be weak and vulnerable are currently empowered. However, they will take time to get used to the system and cope with their new status. During this time, men and other bureaucrats are likely more likely to misuse or abuse their power.

Female pradhans are more likely to be influenced by the family members to stand for the polls and post winning; most of the work is handled by the male family members. On the face, the women won the election but are indirectly being controlled by the male members. The male members took care of the matter and answered people's queries whilst the females continued their household chores.[8]

Panchayat Raj and political parties:

Panchayats are regarded and considered to be a ground for political games and rallies. It is generally viewed as extended arms of the ruling political parties in the state. Moreover, the state government permits the panchayats to function to their advantage and not in accordance with ideals of democratic decentralization.

Furthermore, differences can arise between politicians and bureaucrats. The implementation of the 73rd Amendment has mitigated the power and authority enjoyed by the bureaucracy. There is a stark contrast in their understanding and approach, between the Pradhan's and bureaucrats.

MLAs, ministers, and bureaucrats have felt intimidated due to the fears of losing power in the process of delegation of powers to the Panchayati Raj institutions. It has been seen that higher political members have become hostile towards lower political figures due to the lack of experience or understanding and other failings. They would take the opportunity to malign the functioning of the Panchayati Raj. In addition, the MLA's and MP's are threatened because the careers of the local level politicians are likely to elevate. Hence the confrontation between the local politicians and the decentralization process.

Participation of women

The 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment has brought significant changes that promote equal access and increased engagement of women's in politics. About one-third of total Constituencies have been reserved for women. It also ensures and enhances women's participation in public life. It strives to achieve National policy for women at the foundational level. The commencement of the reservation system in the Panchayati raj institutions empowers women and elevates women's economic, social, and political status in society. It enables liberalisation from the traditionally male-dominated society and brings in a fresher perspective in good governance. The reservation system encourages women's participation in the political framework. It has brought in some positive results and better outcomes in education, health, increase in family income.

This transformation in the system had remarkable results bringing lakhs of women in Panchayats for leadership. The adoption of this Amendment has led the Panchayati Raj system to recognise women's rights, a significant step to bring the unseen potential of women to governance. It enables women's engagement in planning, decision-making, execution of the necessity in the village Panchayats. Women representatives have exhibited their prowess and can adapt and learn managing funds, efficient community-based development, etc. Despite such positive outcomes, women are greatly excluded from the PRI and local governance structures. [9]

Some issues still exist, such as proxy politics, power-brokering, and gender-based discrimination. The women sarpanch have had to counter extreme violence for challenging subsisting power centres in their communities. It is also observed that the male family members utilise the position of the women in their families to stand for the polls and upon the men can control the PRI through the women. [11]

According to Palanithurai (1994), the candidates feared that the women from upper caste and wealthy sections would oppose the reserved category women and would not like the surge in the number of women representatives from weaker sections to local government bodies in Tamil Nadu. There are about thirty types of discrimination and unsolicited practices of untouchability against Dalits in the four villages he chose to study. According to him, Dalit women panchayat leaders were not permitted to visit the gram panchayat office nor manage and control the gram Sabhas. Their husbands were managing office work as proxies. In the district of Agra, Uttar Pradesh, women have been on the sidelines due to various factors such as illiteracy, proxy candidature, low status of women in family and society, poverty, etc. In addition, the issue of caste-based violations of human rights continues to exist, resulting in the exploitation of Dalits, specifically in rural India. Several such problems exist; it is the duty of the citizens to progress and adopt a more progressive approach towards women. These issues can be removed when we accept women empowerment and change the traditional path of thinking. [10]

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The institution of Panchayat Raj is a milestone in the journey of administrative institutions at the grass-root level. Panchayats have played a notable role in the development of the rural areas in India. The system of Panchayati Raj has



faced several hurdles that have been addressed above. However, it is high time that specific corrective action should be taken to ensure a truly representative form of governance. These issues can be combated, but it requires cooperation by the people to accept these changes. The still prevailing traditional thought system must be slowly eradicated for people to understand the meaning of this system truly. Primarily, there should be recognition of the issue that prevails in society. There must be aware of the intricacy of the problems faced; further publicity and its acknowledgement in parliament during the question hour can be considered. Funding must be adequate in order to run these institutions effectively and smoothly. There must also be accountability at all administrative levels in order to hold corrupt officials responsible. [12]

In addition, in various states in India, PRIs is viewed as a platform to provide social justice through the mechanism of dispute resolution, making it accessible, cost-effective, participatory. The dispute resolution function of PRIs is a part of the constitutional directive to make justice accessible to everyone. It mitigates the burden on the judiciary and provides faster access to justice. Furthermore, dispute resolution forums have also been initiated at the various levels of panchayat that function under the jurisdiction of the Panchayats. Also, the focus must be on the training and development of human resources to eliminate any conceptual inconsistency. Women's role in the panchayat must be recognised and not taken over by the male family members; the reason for implementing the reservation policy would truly be a failure. Instead, they need to work towards elevating the overall participation of the community. Hence, there is a need for specific reformation in the policies and laws to truly achieve the people's participation in this system of governance.[13]

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