



STATUS OF WOMEN POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES IN RURAL INDIA: ANALYSING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Since, the passing of 73rd constitutional amendment act, the major change that took place in context of women functionaries of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) was political representation of women through reservation. The entry of women has deep impact on gender equity. Especially it directly challenged the patriarchal social order in India. Now, the political representation of women is increasing. It provides the scope for rural development with progressive outlook. Women get 33% reservation of seats in local government institutions. But at the same time this reservation is limited only in grass root level. It is often found that rural women lack in decision making in any aspects whether economic, social, political or family matters and are dictated by their male counterpart. There for, this paper is intended to assess the current level of participation of women in PRI and factors affecting the women political representation in Rural India.

KEYWORDS: PanchayatRaj Institutions, Reservation, Progressive outlook, Male Counterpart.

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute half of our nation population. But their presence in different demographic bodies has never been commensurate with their demographic strength. This may be due to the influence of patriarchal culture, their relative political apathy, lack of economic independence, low literacy level and lack of political awareness and legislative attitude towards women's active participation in public life. The constitution of India has made provision to protect the interests of women. Fundamental rights and directive principles are mentioned the welfare and empowerment of women. Non Governmental organizations are providing major contributions to the legislation of these rights. The 73 rd constitutional amendment provided mandating reservation for women in the local self governing bodies.

This experiment began in 1995. Of course the representation given to women at the panchayat raj level has been a welfare step and has proved successful attempt to empowering women. But this is only at the grass root level. The proposed bill to give reservation for women in parliament and state legislative assemblies has been subjected to critics from various angels. This paper is attempt to analyze the opportunities and challenges faced by the women political representatives in rural India

EXPERIENCE OF GRASS ROOT LEVEL REPRESENTATION

Ever since the enactment of the 73 rd and 74 th amendments to the constitution of India empowerment of the women at the grass roots has become a popular concept that is used by many with varied meanings and explanations . One third of the seats at the three levels of



grass root institutions have been reserved for women of all categories. Women elected grass root institutions have been performing their roles and functions since 1996 (Sushama, 1998). The impact and the implications of the management of these institutions by women leaders have been felt in many spheres. It was expected that the newly formed critical mass of women who got power through reservation would perform a critical function. But the women leaders who assumed responsibilities are not in a position to perform the critical function as they face a volley of problems. Despite their struggle they continue to make efforts to address the problems of the people.

It is worthwhile to examine the views, news and ideas of women activists and development organizations having rich experience in working with women at grass root level. One quality observed among women is their patience to hear the problems of the public. They also work in adverse circumstances, women possess capacity to utilize potentials and resources hitherto unutilized. It has been observed that women representatives are honest and accurate in presenting issues to the decision-making bodies and authorities. Women would bring new ideas in governance they believe in a sustainable development and this emphasis is natural resources management. Women representatives working at grass root level also believe that communal harmony is an important element of development and they strive to achieve these objectives. 73rd amendment, legalizing reservation and it put a chance to empowering the rural women.

KEY PROVISIONS OF 73RD AMENDMENT BILL

73rd amendments (together with the 74th) are rightly called a silent revolution for various reasons. First of all, the PRIs no longer operate at the whim of state government, but, now they enjoy the constitutional provision and considered the institutions of self government, as parliament at the federal level and legislative assemblies at the state level (Sreekumar, 2006)

The amendment prescribes regular elections every five years and election within six months of the dissolution of any PRI. It mentions the setting up of state election commission. The most revolutionary provision is the reservation of one-third of the seats for women in local bodies, along with reservation of seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in proportion to their regional populations. There were already some women in local government prior to the passing of the 73rd and 74th amendments. But they were few and far between. The state government rarely prescribed at least one or two seats for women in the old style PRI. Very often these

seats were filled through nomination. The nominees, invariably, were members of elite families belonging to higher castes and owning substantial land, thus enjoying high status in terms of family, caste, and class. These women were usually related to established political leaders. The new system of reservation and competitive elections based on adult franchise changed this situation radically.

This statutory reservation for women has provided an opportunity for the formal involvement of women in the development through political process at the grass roots level thereby enabling them to influence the decisions in the local governments.

OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED BY THE RESERVATION

In a democratic set up egalitarian socio economic political order is necessary. In India, when women constitute half of the population, reservation for women in parliamentary institution will lead to an egalitarian political order. Women could not get many chances to participate in political activities. The social and cultural set up to some extent has been mainly responsible for this. If the proposed women's reservation bill becomes act women will get opportunities to participate in political activities. Earlier women's role in interest articulation was comparatively less. But, reservation in parliamentary institution will enhance the chance of women to interact with other social and political bodies. As a result of the representation in various political bodies at the grass root level in state legislature. In national legislature women will have more access to various level of authority. This will again give their chances to enrich their capacities and attain empowerment at various levels.

In total, for one million seats reserved for women in all the local bodies, more than five million women candidates contested. Thus, on an average, there were five women candidates contesting each seat. Moreover, some women condition won unreserved or general seats, defeating their male rivals. Of course, such cases were not many, but they were no less significant (Pandey, 2013).

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE REPRESENTATIVES

The women functionaries of PRIs are not only showing their active presence in the grass root politics but have also played a significant role to fulfill the requirements of women. Nevertheless, women functionaries of PRIs face different kinds of problems carrying out their duties and discharging their responsibilities in the panchayat. During the recent years of panchayath raj, there has been a strong argument to

mobilize, train, inform and equip women in leadership skills and strengthen their understanding of the process that enhance their abilities to claim their due share of power and resources. Women representatives elected to grass root level institutions have been facing numerous problems, within their families, in their social, political and administrative settings, which will be spelt out hereunder. This has often led to ineffective administration of these bodies by women leaders. They do not have a common platform to express their grievances and get them redressed.

Women leaders in panchayats are engaged in a constant struggle. Many leaders are insensitive to their own gender issues in general. They have been oriented to lose their identity and only serve as instruments to operationalize certain process for others. This process has made them sink in localism and become voiceless. As a result, their space is still severely limited. In order to overcome all these hurdles, an attempt has been made to associate women leaders in to a federation in order to address all the issues which they face in administration and to focus on the issues of women (Suchithra, 2014)

Women elected members of the panchayats, many of whom are first times and illiterate, so they need special affirmative measures and need specific capacity building intervention. The most important issue raised by women panchayat representatives relate to the difficulties they are facing in the form of interference of government officials and other influential persons in their jurisdiction. The types of influence that the participants identified as problems are

- ☆ Interference of MLA in panchayat administration.
- ☆ Pressures of contractors for getting work.
- ☆ Secretary is not accountable to grampanchayat.
- ☆ Improper support from government officials.
- ☆ No respect for women from administration.
- ☆ Political interference from other sources.
- ☆ There is no formal relationship between self help groups and gram panchayat.

PROBLEMS FROM ADMINISTRATIVE LEVEL

Second set of problems that women functionaries relate is to administrative planning. Developing a village level plan according to the demands of the community and implementation of the approved plan in the village are major roles of panchayat members. The key issues relating to planning are paltry devolution of resources and public thievery (KrishnaSwamy, 2001). Because resources do not come to the gram panchayat, funds pass

through bureaucratic channels which delays execution of works and more importantly, takes its slice of the cake. Starting from the preparation to implementation of the plan these representatives face a series of problems this are

- ▲ Problem in implementation on plans prepared by the panchayat body in the block
- ▲ It takes longer time to pass gram panchayat proposal for implementation at the district level
- ▲ There is insufficient funds available for development of panchayat
- ▲ MP-MLA funds not linked to panchayats. There is no consultation with panchayat for use of MP/MLA area development funds
- ▲ Funds are not transferred fully (there are cut and leakages)

CHALLENGES FROM SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

Social experiences are negatively influencing the liberation principle of women. In a common space all are talks about the gender freedom, but most of the time women lost her individuality on traditional social order.

Increasing work load:-

The moment the women filed their nomination for election to the grass root level institutions, their workload doubled and so did constrains. At every stage, the elected women representatives have to tackle the problems of the family carefully; otherwise, she courts trouble.

Illiteracy:-

It is a basic problem among the newly elected women representatives. They are not able to write and read, but they allowed to file their nomination. After they are elected to positions, they feel annoyed about their inability to read and rights.

Domination of males:-

It is clear from the experiences of elected women representatives that their capacity has not been recognized by the males of their family. There is a believes that women has been elected to panchayat institutions only because of the influence of their husband or other men in their families.

Negative attitude of officials:-

Elected women representatives find it difficult to convince officials in government offices as they have a poor opinion about women representatives. The officials feel that elected women representatives are in position simply because of reservation policy and that they do not have any opinion or vision of their own. The officials assume that women representatives will accept whatever they advise.

Ill-treatment:-

It is a sorry state of affairs in government offices that elected women representative with a high social and economic background get respect while poor elected women representatives, especially Dalits face only ill-treatment. Untouchability is in practice in remote areas. For Dalits leaders, it becomes a problem. Dalit leaders are not respected and, in many villages the traditional caste leaders conduct the proceedings. Traditional caste hierarchy is still defined the social order of the society.

Information Blockade:-

There are several hurdles and barriers to the process of women empowerment. Information blockade is the most powerful weapon used by officials to disempowered women. The officials circulate information booklets and details only among men and not among women. Even elected men representatives are not willing to share their knowledge with women representatives.

Domination of caste Panchayat:-

Traditional caste panchayat leaders are yet another barrier to elected women representatives as they impose conditions and restrictions on women's leadership. If the elected women representatives belong to other castes, particularly Dalit, she cannot do any work at all. Invariably she has been under the control of the traditional panchayat leader. Otherwise, she has to face problems.

Social cleavages:-

Caste has entrenched itself everywhere and become a barrier to the smooth functioning of panchayat, while forming Self Help Groups (SHG) all women are united and do not entertain any cleavage (Palanithurai, 2007). But, after forming the same and functioning for a period of time, the women are compelled by their men folk to look at issues from the perspectives of caste.

Lack of Motivation:-

To perform any job, motivation is important. Elected women representatives are new to this job. All of them have not taken up this assignment willingly or voluntarily. Further, they have been facing problems without any support. There is no motivation for them. As a result, many elected women representatives are in a state of mental depression.

Suggestions for improvement:-

The women and challenges are almost synonymous terms. Because the Indian society is not very open for women, women face challenges both at the political and social levels. The participants from different states or regions however face different kinds of problems. As mentioned earlier, the process for generating the list of challenges facing women members of PRIs was co-

terminuses with the process of identifying the problems and opportunities. Most of the challenges faced by women functionaries in the PRIs in the different states had a lot of commonality. At the same time, solutions can be found to all these problems. The women representatives themselves have identified some solutions. They are listed hereunder.

- ◆ Proper orientation has to be given to elected women representatives by way of periodical training.
- ◆ Institution based legal support has to be provided to women who take up the struggle to administer social justice.
- ◆ Comprehensive awareness programs have to be conducted in rural areas on the problems of women, and information has to be provided on all vital matters pertaining to improvement in the quality of their life.

Women need orientation, sensitization, capacity building, information and counseling continuously through organizations. When women leaders respond to socio political challenges, they are to be supported by organizations and institutions which work for their empowerment. Wherever such interventions are available, the achievements of women leaders are substantial and impressive.

CONCLUSION

Women empowerment is a multi dimensional phenomenon. This includes many issues like education, employment, healthcare and maternity, legal rights and sense of equality among men and women. One important task the women parliamentarians have to take up is the democratization of education among girls. The spread of education among girls will help to inculcate values, attitudes and orientations leading to socialization of women especially rural women. Legalized reservations and participations are help for the real empowerment. If real empowerment has to be materialized, the value based approach needs to be followed. It gives us hope that enactment of the reservation will revolutionize and catalyze the socio economic and political sphere.

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