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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS – IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Empowerment of women appears to be a much publicized concept of the 21st century. It is a multi dimensional process which should enable individuals or a group .of individuals to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consists of: greater access to knowledge and resources, great autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives or have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice. Generally development with justice is expected to generate the Forces that lead to empowerment of various sections of population in a Country and to raise their status.

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance. It is both a process and the result of the process. The concept of women's empowerment, throughout the world, has its roots in women's movement. It is since the mid 1980s that this term became popular in the field of development, especially in reference to women. In India, it is the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980- 1985) which can be taken as a landmark for the cause of women. It is here that the concept of women and empowerment was introduced for the first time. Political participation means not only using the right to vote, but also power- sharing, co-decision-making and co-policy-making at all levels of governance of the State.

It is now widely accepted that self- governing institutions at the local level are essential for national growth and for effective people's participation and that they are an integral and indispensable part of the democratic process. "Grass roots of democracy", based on small units of government, enables people to feel a sense of responsibility and to inculcate the values of democracy. At the same time, it is also offers a unique opportunity to both men and women to participate in public affairs, including development work. In a vast, diverse and complex, subcontinent, decentralization is also a political and administrative imperative.

Self governing rural local bodies are described in the Indian context as institutions of democratic decentralization or Panchayat.

Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been in existence since the time immemorial when the village was considered as basic unit of administration and the powers were decentralized. During the long spanned journey of centuries, these institutions have undergone many changes in the structural pattern but the basic idea of community welfare through their politics remains unchanged. Panchayat Raj is an institutional expression of the policy of democratic decentralization. Introduction of Panchayat Raj in free India was held as one of the most imaginative and institutional innovation made by the national leadership. It was also expected that leadership at the local level would be potentially capable of solving local problems through PRIs finding new pride and purpose in them. Further it was also predicted that a lot would depend mainly upon the attitude of the State government and the constructive approach of the bureaucracy towards

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the philosophy of PRIs.

The concept of Panchayat Raj is deeply entrenched in the process of strengthening the basic democracy at the grassroots level by people's participation. The rationale behind the concept is to involve the public in local planning, identification of beneficiaries, decision making and proper implementation of policies and more programmes of the people as desired by them. PRIs have today the basic commitment towards development. It is a strategy for the improvement in social, economic and political life of the people, with special emphasis on the rural poor. Thus one of the ideas behind the introduction of PRIs is to strengthen the rural base with the primary motto of rural development.

These institutions have significant role to play in the planned development of rural India. Therefore, planning under and through Panchayat Raj is essential not only for the progress of rural development but also for the success of our National Plan. The type of planning required under these institutions is micro planning based on the ideas of "planning from below". During the post independence era to this date the journey of these institutions has been the story of vicissitudes marking the enhancement, decline and stagnation period overlapping each other. Various committees headed by Shriyuths Balwant Rai Mehta, Ashok Mehta, V.P.Nay, P.B. Paul, Bangirwar, G.V.K. Rao and L.N. Singhvi over hauled these institutions which gave necessary impetus to 73rd Amendment enactment, ultimately halting the present state of affairs. After the impartial retrospection of the past upheaval one is constrained to express dissatisfaction over some and satisfaction over some other matters like women's participation, which were revamped with the motive of being used as an instrument for women's empowerment.

Considering the drawbacks of the old structure, due to bureaucracy, rich elite domination, poverty, illiteracy problems associated with lack of personnel delegation of authority, coordination between local bodies and district administration, 73rd Amendment Act 1992 came into existence to cope up with them efficiently through the provision of IX, XI Schedule, to handle the precarious conditions effectively.

Micro level planning or planning from below and the positive public participation have been the soul and spirit of the democratic decentralization, dispersing the power to public at different levels. Further the lowest tier Gram Sabha has been given utmost attention wherein people can participate in the process of decision making and implementation of planning in the interest of village development. Article 243(9) thus recognizes Panchayats as the institutions of self government with prime responsibilities of promoting economic development ensuring social justice. It was a great visionary the Late Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi who gave us the opportunity to get associated with development process by the provision of 33 per cent reservation in these bodies.

The 73rd Amendment Act came into effect from April 24, 1993, bringing bright epoch in the life of deprived eight lakh women who were brought into mainstream of power. The challenge before us is not to just talk about the gender equality and create awareness but to initiate the process of metamorphosis of the societies to turn away from the "gender discrimination" not only to make legislation and put them on paper but to implement them in letter and spirits. The empowerment includes overall development in terms of education, employment, access to the resources, legislative and decision making powers, health and awareness.

However, in terms of holistic approach, while talking overall development and empowerment of women whether rural or urban, rich or poor, whether educated or illiterate which can be viewed as a positive change if compared with the situation prevailing a decade ago. Women's groups also felt a need for discussing the role and status of the women in democratic process and their woefully inadequate participation and representation in the decision making process. Whether in Parliament, State Assemblies or Local Panchayats at the grassroots level. Despite the 73 and 74th Amendments 1993 giving 33 per cent reservation to women, very few of them came forward and accepted the challenges, out of whom only two per cent were the commoners. In spite of 33 per cent reservation for the women in Panchayat Raj nearly 31 per cent seats are occupied by the women that too who are either relatives of MLAs or Former Panchayat leaders. Needless to stress upon the fact that character assassination, mudslinging, and gender bias of our male dominated society are the biggest impediments in the way of empowerment discouraging the majority of the women folk from entering into the politics. But still there are some mentionable women who ventured to cross all the barriers and became power centre for the betterment of the community vis-à-vis their village.

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