



## PARTICIPATION AND DECISION MAKING POWER OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT RAJ: A SOCIAL WORK ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*The present study analyze the women in panchyat raj system their Participation and decision making power, 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 (73rdAmendment) 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. The concept of empowerment of women is of recent origin. The word "empowerment" has been given currency by UN agencies during recent years. It is increasing of self that the Constitutional goal of gender equality cannot be ensured as long as women are not empowered with modern education, employment and ability to assert their self-respect, independence and autonomy to make choices, and opportunities to participate in developmental activities of the nation. Besides, the traditional securities and supports provided by the joint family, kinship, caste and religion are gradually being eroded under the impact of modernization – science and technology, formal education and decentralization of power. The term 'empower' is relative to weaknesses, disabilities, disadvantages and deprivations based on sex, age, population (minority/ majority), region, etc.*

**KEYWORDS:** Participation and decision making power, Panchayati Raj system.

### INTRODUCTION

The word 'Empower' means make one powerful or equip one with the power to face the challenges of life, to overcome the disabilities, handicaps and inequalities. Empowerment is an active multidimensional process, which should enable women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It would consist in providing greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision-making, greater ability to plan their lives, greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and freedom from shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice (Sapru, 1989). According to Karl (1995), empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building, leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making powers and control and to transformative action. According to Borain (2003), empowerment is the process of challenging existing power equations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. The goals of women's empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology, to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetrate gender discrimination and social inequality, and to enable poor women to gain access to and control over both material and informational resources.

Empowering people is one of the major issues of Indian polity today. Panchayati Raj is an institution through which people can be



empowered. The moment the bill was passed in Indian Parliament, debates and discussions were initiated as to whether the new system is an administrative reform or political reform. The new institution has been visualized from various perspectives and dimensions. It has got a greater responsibilities and functions to transform the rural society and urban society in many dimensions.

Women's empowerment, ideally speaking, means claiming and sharing equality with men. However, since men have certain natural advantages over women, they (men) are likely to dominate women in many spheres of life. Therefore, empowerment should be understood in a relative and not absolute sense.

### **PANCHAYAT RAJ:**

Panchayat Raj is a local self governing institution of a village or a group of villages, based on democratic principles. It establishes strong linkages between villages, talukas and districts. It is the base of democratic pyramid in the country. It involves people in decision making, bring in awareness and motivate people and under stand the local problems, needs and to appreciate the local resources and skills. "Panchayati Raj institutions, being units of local self government, came as a state subject under the constitution and the states and union territories were free to design their structure, powers and functions keeping in view their local resources. As a result, some states opted for three tier system some for two tier system and yet another for one tier" (Ambedkar, 2000).

With independence, the whole social, economic and political scenario of India underwent a significant change. India accepted a modern Constitution based on principles of democracy, equality and freedom. The Constitution mainly focused on the welfare and empowerment of weaker sections. In a democratic system, devolution of power to the people becomes very important. For it enables the people to participate in decision-making process as effective and responsible citizens. "Decentralization through Panchayat Raj Institutions is the way to combine popular responsibility with dispersal of decision making powers" (Krishnan, 1992).

A democratic political system does not mean only the constitution of assemblies and parliaments, but also presupposes the existence of grass-root bodies. It signifies a marked devolution of power from the higher to lower levels in a way that the units of local government exercise their authority with the participation of the people of that area with occasional control and supervision of the provincial and central governments. Thus, democratic decentralization aims at making democracy real by bringing the millions into the functioning of their representative government, at the lowest level. It thus becomes a system of grass-roots democracy that seeks to link the units of administration established in the remotest villages of a vast country with the units of higher government at the level (Johari, 1974).

### **PANCHAYAT RAJ IN KARNATAKA:**

In 1956, the Karnataka State came into being. In 1959, the Karnataka Village Panchayats and Local Boards Act was passed. The Act, though it gave a certain degree of uniformity to Panchayat Raj Institutions in the State, it failed to secure any amount of democratic decentralization, as the Act did not confer real powers and resources to the Panchayat Raj Institutions.

With a view to making the Panchayat bodies more responsive to the needs and problems of rural society, a committee was constituted with Kondajji Basappa as Chairman to recommend a suitable structure for the state. Following the broad guidelines of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee, the Kondajji Basappa Committee recommended a three-tier panchayat system for Karnataka. Accordingly, a bill was introduced in the assembly in 1964. However, both the ruling party in neither the state nor the government was interested in such radical steps and as a result nothing happened in this direction. So much so that elections to the panchayat bodies could not be held for a decade – 1975-85. The state waited till 1983 when the Janata Party came to power. The Karnataka Government accepted and implemented the Panchayat Raj system in 1985 based on the model proposed by the Ashok Mehta Committee viz., two-tier system (Bhargava, 1979).

It is plain that the government in Karnataka and the then Congress (I) never believed in decentralization of power to the rural people. It shows how the Congress (I) government discounted the importance of Panchayat bodies as forms of grass-roots democracy. This was the situation in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the advent of non-Congress (I) governments in West Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh brought the Panchayats back into focus. First and foremost, five yearly elections to the Panchayat bodies have been made obligatory. Three such elections were held in West Bengal, where the United Front Government was in office since 1977, while the successive Congress (I) government in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh had put the clock back (Bhargava, 1979).

### **Gram Panchayats, Rural Development and Women's Empowerment:**

Gram Panchayats have not played any significant role in developing rural society. Plans and programmes in principle meant for the weaker sections were cornered by upper castes and classes. Much worse, Panchayat Raj system created greater socio-economic inequalities in rural society. Studies have shown that Gram Panchayat could not become an instrument of transformation of rural society.

It is unfortunate to record that the very Government of India could not perceive the significance of women's empowerment, not to speak of Gram Panchayats. It is only recently, the concept of Women's Empowerment has caught the attention of planners and policy makers.

### **The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment: A New Chapter for Women's Empowerment:**

Political reservation for weaker sections has been an important tool of ushering in equal opportunities for development since the advent of British rule in India. Political reservation for the SCs and STs and OBCs has ensured vast social, economic and political opportunities for mobility.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Constitution of India in 1992 introduced a new political initiative to empower women. The Constitution Amendment Act, 1992, Article 243 D (3) reads: Not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women (SCs and STs) and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.

### **Salient Features of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act:**

The salient features of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act are as follows:

1. A minimum number of seats and political offices for women are provided for only Gram Panchayats,
2. Reservation of seats for women applies only to directly elected members in every panchayat,
3. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats including the number of seats for women belonging to SCs and STs in every Panchayat have to be reserved for women and further that such seats have to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat,
4. Offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats should be reserved to women, SCs and STs at each level of Panchayats,
5. The number of seats to be reserved for the SCs and STs in every panchayat should, as nearly as possible, be in proportion to the share of population of the Panchayat concerned.
6. The Constitution provides for reservation of seats and offices of chairpersons only to the directly elected members of the Panchayats, but not to the other members like the chairpersons of the lower level panchayats, the backward class citizens or other ex-officio members.

The assumption underlying the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment is that provision for reservation for seats in Panchayats will bring about a change in terms of empowerment among men and women member in particular and rural women in general. As revealed by many of the studies, though women were given reservation to participate in Panchayats, still their family members, especially their husbands are making the decisions and as such, though decision making power is provided to women by the Government at Panchayat level politics, in reality it has become impossible. Hence, the proposed study is aimed to explore the real participation and decision making power of women in Panchayat raj institutions in backward region

of Hyderabad-Karnataka. Hyderabad-Karnataka region is backward and it got special status under Section 371(J) of the Indian Constitution.

### 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Aggarwal (2000) conducted a study on 60 women panchayat members of 12 villages in Hisar district of Haryana state. The findings revealed that the Sarpanches gave 1st ranks to public work and civic amenities followed by rank to sanitation and medical relief work and rank high to judicial work followed by trade and commerce, political work, social work, agricultural work, educational work and economic work in the order of ranks. Whereas the women panches gave first rank to political work followed by social work, sanitation and medical relief work, public work and civic amenities, economic work, judicial work, educational work, agricultural work and trade and commerce in the order of ranks. It was further revealed that while majority of the Sarpanches and Panches came under nil participation categories, the Sarpanches had comparatively much higher participatory role in panchayats as compared to the panches.

Kahlon (2004) conducted a study of women sarpanches in 20 villages from 10 blocks of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts of Punjab. On the basis of the study, it was found that majority of women representatives, particularly Jats, belonged to the family of ex-sarpanches or panches. This has strengthened the grip of existing rural elite. Even if they do not belong to well to do families (as it was in case of SC women sarpanches), the rural elite i.e. the ex-sarpanches of these villages were instrumental in getting them elected as village head. That is why they are acting as de-facto sarpanches. Being illiterate, they are totally dependent not only upon their husbands but also on formal sarpanches. Ironically, none of the women respondents were aware of the various aspects of 73rd Amendment related to their reservation. If they have to go outside to village for panchayat work, they have to take permission from their parents or family members. This shows that in spite of all provisions for women empowerment, the real power still remains in the hands of men.

Deshmukh (2009) emphasized on the participation of women in panchayats. The study covered the women panchayat members from Wambori Gram Panchayati in Maharashtra. The different aspects such as socio-economic, education, political and leadership are discussed. The study concluded with the remarks that to a greater extent, women have power in panchayats, it is indirectly influenced by the family members of the women panchayat members.

Palanithurai (2009) conducted a survey of women panchayat members in Tamil Nadu. Social aspects of these respondents show that most of them are from middle class family and having education up to 10 years. The economic aspects show that majority of the respondents are from middle income group, but only a few of the women have authority to make the decisions in their families. Further, it is surprising to note that male panchayat members are dominating in panchayat decisions.

Prasad (2009) discussed on the participation of women in politics. The study emphasized the privileges and responsibilities of women as panchayat members and legislators. The paper critically examined the problems of women in panchayats in decision making and advantages of being women panchayat members.

### 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.

### CONCLUSION

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.

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