



## PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN "PANCHAYAT RAJ" (A TOOL FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN)

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### ABSTRACT

Political participation of woman is necessary because it makes a positive and significant impact on the rights and living conditions of women. It express them to the outside world and widens their horizons. It provides a forum them to raise specific issues concerning women. The participation of women in politics and particularly in PRIs is a important political development in last 20th century. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantage section of the society schedule caste, schedule tribes and woman. This paper was an efforts to know the participation of women in Panchayat.

**KEYWORDS:** Participation, Panchayati Raj, Women, Governance.

### INTRODUCTION:

Panchayati Raj is not a new phenomenon in the country. Although panchayats existed in India long before British rule, Panchayati Raj the formal system of local self-government came into being only after Independence. When the Panchayati Raj was introduced in 1959 very few women contested or got elected. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) had recommended that besides the 20 members of the Panchayat Samiti, there should be 2 women "who are interested in work among women and children" as co-opted members. A similar provision was suggested with regard to the village panchayat. Following this a few states did make provisions for women's representation. But the co-option principle was undemocratic and it also was dependent on the largesse bestowed by political parties or the dominant social group. Therefore, women's representation became mere tokenism.

In 1976, The Committee on the Status of Women in India recommended the establishment of statutory all-women panchayats at village level, with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare, development programmes for women and children, as a transitional measure. However, the recommendation has never been adopted statutorily anywhere, though such all-women panchayats emerged in some places for a short while. In April 1993, the 73(Constitution Amendment) Act came into force and accordingly one third of the total seats in states local selfgovernment institutions were statutorily reserved for women. Along with this reservation there were also other changes brought into the Act, notable amongst them being:

- Panchayats would be considered political institutions in a truly decentralised structure.
- There would be direct elections to all three tiers of governance.
- The panchayat would be accountable to the gram sabha, constituting the voters of the village/villages.
- There would be a separate election commission and also a finance commission for panchayats in every state.
- It was obligatory on the part of the centre and the state to provide adequate funds for the panchayats to enable them to function properly.



At a simplistic level the 73rd Amendment assured women a place within political processes, but what it did, more importantly, was create the possibility of change within the political discourse in the country. Women, hitherto, were exposed to a style of governance created and led by men and all their reference points for institutionalised politics was the framework that had been structured around male needs and aspirations. Whether they were co-opted and in the process corrupted by the dominant political structure or their electoral victory and subsequent responsibilities empowered them was not of concern at that point. What was of importance was the fact that women were legally empowered to occupy seats of power and control that went beyond the confines and decisions taken within the home.

#### **PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS :**

The participation of women within the political processes at the local self governance level varies a lot depending on the context within which they are live and work. At the panchayat level, some women ward members and sarpanchs are vocal and get their work done. Active participation of women within the village still remains limited. Very many areas still have **caste panchayats** where women have no voice and public life is denied to women. Leadership has been thrust upon women in the limited sense of being an elected representative but beyond that there is not a positive environment for women Although there are elected women representatives within the panchayat, the participation of women within the Gram Sabha remains a totally male affair in most cases. This is not the fault of the women but is indicative of the social milieu within which these women reside. Participation in **a gram sabha meeting held** in the afternoon or early morning could mean that a poor woman would lose her wages for the day. Depending on the season, women cannot drop their work in the fields sometimes an hour away from the village-to attend meetings. Men collude together to prevent women from raising any point for discussions at meetings. Government officials, inspite of knowing that all the villagers have the right to attend the gram sabha and participate freely, come with their own agenda and very often do not allow the women to speak. Depending on where they reside, mobility is severely restricted due to the unavailability of transport.

Numerous instances have been cited where the sarpanch's husband conducts the meeting and takes the decisions and the woman is a figurehead. In the recently concluded Gram Sabha meetings held in Haryana, observers noticed that the rules for conducting a gram sabha were Violated. In district Fatehabad, numerous meetings were presided over by the -Panchayat Secretary or the husband of the Sarpanch. Women who came to attend the meeting were not allowed to raise any concerns and were asked to affix their thumbprint onto the register. This is inspite of the fact that a number of meetings were held with the women to apprise them of their roles and responsibilities. Interactions with a lot of women sarpanchs revealed that the Panchayat Secretary who in most cases is a man, or the Up Pradhan interferes a lot within the meetings and very often does not allow the woman to conduct the meeting and address issues and problems of the village.

The Panchayati Raj Act still remains a mystery to most women and men. Certain basics are known- elections are held once every five years, the Sarpanch is the local administrative head, there arc reservations for women. Beyond this not much is known. Very many women are still under the misconception that women can only contest the election on a reserved seat. They do not know that it is mandatory for the Gram Sabha to be held twice a year (or four times a year in the case of some states). Elected members leant from the Panchayat Secretaries-if they are lucky-or from their male family members. Even if they do get information, a tot of unlearning and learning goes oh simultaneously. The Sarpanchs tend to learn because they have to run the panchayat whereas the Panchs remain removed from a lot of the activity.

It is not enough to say that women are not aware of the Act or that there is not adequate participation by the women in panchayat activities and meetings. It is essential to understand the reasons for this apparent lack of involvement. Women in the villages lack the freedom of movement almost completely. Traditions and customs bind them down. Travelling out of the village on her own is unheard of and in the company of men other than her immediate family members is sacrilege. In addition to these hindrances, the lack of basic infrastructure also becomes a problem. Very many villages are not directly

connected with main roads and women have to travel many kilometres before they can avail of some form of transport. There is also no guarantee that the concerned official will be present in the office when she gets there. In case she has to wait at the office there are no basic amenities available-toilets, drinking water, waiting room.

**Illiteracy is a major hindrance for almost all the women** and combined with the lack of mobility, they are rendered rather incapable. Sarpanchs who cannot access the financial statements or written directives from the Block are dependent on their family members for all information. Women, too, have internalised the fact that because they are illiterates they would be unable to participate in meetings.

**Social customs and taboos further restrict women's** participation in panchayat activities. Women have to keep their face covered, they cannot speak if their elderly male relatives are present in the room, unmarried and married women cannot interact freely with men, they cannot travel on their own—a long and endless list. For these traditions to change women have to fight established patriarchal norms and very often, these battles take too much out of them. In many cases, men actively aid the continuation of these traditions so that power sharing can be kept to a minimum. However, this is not to say that women cannot overcome these barriers. There are numerous women who have done so, but they are more the exception rather than the rule.

### **PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM AND ROLE OF WOMEN :**

The 73rd Amendment created a space structurally for women and the impact of this can be measured in terms of the number of women who have contested the elections all over the country. What is difficult to define, or even measure, is the empowerment of women because of the Amendment.

If empowerment is seen a process by which women overcome the challenges of the patriarchal society within which they live, then it is difficult to maintain that the 73 Amendment has achieved it for women. For the last few years, women have felt empowered at different points through their experiences of governance and this has been at various levels. At a personal level, a number of them have challenged their roles as mere care givers and have entered the public sphere and worked along with the men: Elected women representatives were unanimous that they have definitely gained some prestige by virtue of winning an election but were, in most cases, unable to quantify that gain. The act of sitting on a chair, affixing their signature onto an official paper, interacting with village community consisting predominantly of men, getting work done through the government officials, dealing with finances—all of this is empowering.

In terms of social recognition and respect, a great many of them have had to leave aside their personal concerns and take on the needs of their community and village and this has led to an increase in their own ability to handle issues. In addition, it has made the constituency look up to them. Women within the community have seen a woman sarpanch and have felt that this is a role model they could emulate. The younger girls in the village are seeing the lives of women being transformed and are eager to learn and emulate their mothers, aunts, and relatives.

Most women have mentioned the increased access to knowledge, information and awareness as a major gain for themselves. Mobility has also increased in a number of cases and with it a confidence has crept into their lives. What is difficult to measure is the impact upon the personal lives of these women. For some, the power equations within the household has changed with the men, of the family taking on more responsibility of household chores and respecting the decision making capacity of their wives.

What has been of critical importance is the fact that women within panchayats have, to some extent, been able to perceive the ways by which they have been denied their rights. This form of a critical gender consciousness has only come about because of their involvement, albeit peripheral in some cases, within the political machinery at village level. They have also had to interact with the other women in the village in order to understand the needs and to look at it in a crass way—to retain the support of their community!

The fact that a large number of the women elected have been illiterate and have had to face constant comments on it has ensured that they now take the education of their daughters seriously.

Since empowerment is a process, then the present elected women representatives of panchayats represent the start of the process. They have been around only for five years, a short period to record impressive gains. It is still too early to comment on the efficacy of the Amendment to alter the political consciousness of women, but the beginning has been made and there can only be movement forward.

### **PRIs : A Tool for Women's Empowerment :**

Reservations for women within the Panchayati Raj Institutions paves the way for the entry of women at grass root level political systems. But if this has to be of value to women, it is critical that efforts are made to include them actively at all levels of decision making as well as provide them with the information and knowledge that is required to make them better planners.

Illiteracy is one of the main problems that affect women capability to acquire information. It would be futile to suggest ways in which that can be overcome since the government and planners are aware of it and are making efforts to alter the situation. What needs to be done, however, is the creation of methods and a pedagogy that makes learning interesting and fun for the women.

Training then becomes an integral part of the mechanisms that need to be adopted to enhance women's participation within governance. Over the years there has been countless programmes—both government and NGO sponsored to make women representatives aware of their rights and responsibilities. These trainings have provided the women with information about Panchayati Raj Institutions but in many cases it has not addressed the issues of gender inequality or challenged the existing socio-cultural norms. For any training to have a transformative impact on women's lives, it is crucial that the training is rooted within the framework of women's empowerment.

Women's empowerment is a state of being that reflects a certain level of critical consciousness about external realities, and an awareness about their internal thought construction and belief systems that have a bearing on their well being in terms of gender and social equity. It also refers to a state of determination to use one's physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual resources to protect, nurture and sustain values that guarantee gender equity at personal, household, social, political and other institutional levels. This definition identifies transformation of values as a core attribute and includes within it transformation at both a personal and a public level.

Therefore women have to be provided with an analysis of the situation they are in as well as an understanding of the mechanisms of government functioning and the rules and regulations of the Panchayati Raj Act. For this form of a training to be successful, it is crucial that the trainers themselves are aware and concerned about gender issues and share the goal of empowerment of women and marginalised communities.

Training can be effective if it is integrated within the lives of the community and therefore a possible vehicle could be the Mahila Mandals or women's groups. Women are not working in isolation and it is imperative that the other women are part of this process. If elected women representatives are going through a transformative process by which they are questioning accepted beliefs and norms, it is necessary that there are other women within the community who are doing the same. The idea behind these trainings is the creation of a critical mass that will support and form the base for a change in the culture and functioning of political institutions. In addition, women entering the political system within the next couple of years will be accountable to and supported by a mass based women's movement.

It is not only the women who need an understanding of the socio-political structure but also the men. Therefore they have to be included within the gamut of training too. An effective way of including the youth of the community and creating an aware collective is the formation of children's panchayats at village level. This would introduce the concept of Panchayati Raj at an early stage and enable them to be better leaders when they grow up.

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**CONCLUSION :**

To sum up the above analysis, it may be said that after 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment and participation of women in the Panchayat Raj Institutions has increased both quantitatively as well as qualitatively. The reservation of seats for women in PRIs is the main factor for their participate the grass roots level. Now, not only the numerical strength of women has increased PRIs but they are also taking active part in the functioning of PRIs. They not only attend the meetings of Gram Sabha and PRIs but also raise their voices on various issues concerning the general masses and women. They are now the part of the decision making process of the PRIs. The majority of the women representatives take decisions on their own and there in now less interference of the male members of the family. The women representatives from educated and middle economic status groups participate more effectively in the functioning and decision-making process of the PRIs. Being a woman is not a hindrance in getting the things done. The husbands and other family members are found to supportive towards women while discharging their duties as representatives of PRIs. In nutshell we can say that increasing participation of women in PRIs has empowered them politically at the grass roots level and has also changed the nature of the rural power structure.

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