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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND ROLE OF WOMEN MEMBERS IN PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

The study entitled „Role of Women Members in Gram Panchayats’ was conducted in Hyderabad Karnataka to profile the Women Panchayat Members (WPM) and study their awareness regarding constitution, functions, powers, duties of the members of Gram Panchayat along with participation in functioning as Panchayat members. A sample of 120 WPM was proportionately selected representing all the blocks of

Hydrabad Karnataka. and interviewed. About half of the WPM were between 40-50 years and above 50 years of age. Majority were married, illiterate and belonged to joint families and had low level of previous involvement in Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI). The level of awareness of WPM was medium regarding constitution, functioning and administrative functions. It was low regarding developmental, legislative and judicial functions; duties and powers. Participation level was also low. Age was found to be negatively and significantly related with the level of awareness. However, this relationship was positive with education, media exposure, organizational membership and family income but participation was positively related. Involvement in PRI was positively and significantly related to awareness but relationship was non-significant with participation level. The results of the study indicate that WPM lack awareness about their functions, powers and duties. WPM need to be capacitated in their role performance.

KEYWORDS: Awareness, Gram Panchayats, Participation, Women members.

INTRODUCTION:

The word “Panchayat” comprises of the words, ‘PANCH’ and ‘AYAT’. The word “Panchen” in Sanskrit stands for number five. A group of five persons forming a body to arbitrate upon a dispute, are called “Panchas”. In Sanskrit, „Ayatnam” means place or abode or house. According to the father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi, “India lives in

its villages” and the only way to empower rural India was through transfer of power at the grass-root level. Panchayati Raj is not a new phenomenon in the country. Its history goes back to more than 1000 years and has its roots in ancient India institutions when the villages were little republic governed by their Panchayats.

PANCHAYATI RAJ IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

The task of strengthening Panchayati Raj system fell on the Indian government formed after

independence. Mahatma Gandhi strongly believed in Gram Swaraj and advocated transfer of power to the rural masses. He was of the opinion that villages should govern themselves through elected Panchayats and self-sufficient. But Panchayati Raj Institutions had no place in the draft of the Constitution prepared in 1948. Mahatma Gandhi severely criticized this and called for immediate attention.

Almost after five decades of independence, in the year 1993, the Government of India took a

revolutionary step by making *Panchayati Raj* Institutions a part of the Constitution. *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, the grass root units of local self-government have been considered as instruments of socio economic transformation in rural India. *Panchayati Raj* is identified as institutional expression of democratic decentralization in India. Decentralization of power to the *Panchayats* is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision making process. Local governments being closer to the people can be more responsive to local needs and can make better use of resources. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only through mass participation in the governance.

The *Panchayati Raj* has become the backbone of our democratic setup. Balwant-Rai Mehta committee in year 1957 recommended a three-tier system of *Panchayati Raj*. These recommendations were adopted in 1958. *Gram Sabha* and *Gram Panchayat* at village level, *Panchayat Samiti* at block or *tehsil* and *Zila Parishad* at the district level were constituted as a part of their implementation.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The system of democratic decentralization popularly known as *Panchayati Raj* is considered as an instrument to ensure democracy and socio-economic transformation. India has a long tradition of local governments, going back to more than 4000 years. This institution has survived numerous political changes and upheavals in the ancient and medieval 2 periods till the advent of the British Raj. With the coming of the colonial administration, the patterns of the working of the local bodies underwent marked changes. Considering the importance of decentralization of power, efforts were made at various levels to work out a system. In this context following initiatives were taken:

1. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee

Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was the first Committee set up in 1957 to look into the problems of democratic decentralization in independent India. The Committee was asked to report on community development projects. The Committee made far-reaching recommendations in the direction of democratic decentralization and rural reconstruction. It pointed out that the community development programme was not successful because it failed to evoke local initiative and that in the absence of local initiative and local interest, development would not be possible. The committee laid down five fundamental principles:

- i. Three tier structures of local self-government bodies from village to the district level and linking these bodies.
- ii. Genuine transfer of power and responsibility to these bodies to enable them to discharge their responsibility.
- iii. Transfer of adequate resources to these bodies to enable them to discharge their responsibilities.
- iv. Channelization of all welfare and developmental schemes and programmes at all three levels through these bodies, and
- v. Facilitation of devolution and disposal of power and responsibility through three-tier system in future.

The committee envisaged three tier systems of *Panchayats* known as *Zilla Parishad*, *Panchayat Samiti* and *Gram Panchayat* and recommended encouragement of peoples' participation in community work, promotion of agriculture and animal husbandry, promoting the welfare of the weaker sections and women through the *Panchayats*. Committee made recommendations for co-opting of two women who are interested to work for women and children.

However, like the rest of the male members, women were not to be elected but were to be co-opted. The recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee came into effect on 1st April 1958. Rajasthan was the first state to implement it on 2nd October 1959. By mid 1960s, *Panchayat* reached all parts of the country. More than 2, 17,300 village *Panchayats* were established. . They covered over 96.0 percent of the 5, 79,000 inhabited villages and 92 per cent of rural population.

2. K. Santhanam Committee (1963)

One of the prime areas of concern in this long debate on *Panchayati Raj* institutions was fiscal decentralization. The K. Santhanam Committee was appointed to look solely at the issue of PRI finance, in 1963. The fiscal capacity of PRIs tends to be limited, as rich resources of revenue are pre-empted by higher levels of government, and issue is still debated today. The Committee was asked to determine issues related to sanctioning of grants to PRIs by the state government, evolving mutual financial relations between the three tiers of PRIs, gifts and donation, handing over revenue in full or part to PRIs. The Committee recommended the following:

- i. *Panchayats* should have special powers to levy special tax on land revenues and home taxes, etc.,
- ii. People should not be burdened with too many demands (taxes),
- iii. All grants and subventions at the state level should be mobilized and sent in a consolidated form to various PRIs,
- iv. A *Panchayat Raj* Finance Corporation should be set up to look into the financial resource of PRIs at all levels, provide loans and financial assistance to these grassroots level governments and also provide non-financial requirements of villages.

These issues have been debated over the last three decades and have been taken up by the State Finance Commissions which are required to select taxes for assignment and sharing, identifying the principles for such sharing and assignment, determine the level of grants and recommend the final distribution of state's transfers to local authorities.

3. Ashok Mehta Committee (1978)

Till the mid sixties, *Panchayati Raj* system flourished in India. But there was decline in *Panchayati Raj* Institutions after the mid sixties mainly because of centralized tendencies of functioning all over the country. The elections were not held regularly and the participation of people weakened in these bodies. Inefficiency, corruption, favoritism, uncertainty and irregularity led to their decline. Development programmes were kept out of their preview. Centrally sponsored schemes were initiated; parallel administrative bodies were created and government reduced funds considerably. During the period of national emergency, these institutions lost their significance. The village *Panchayats* was made subordinate units of government to implement its programmes.

In this backdrop in 1977, the Janata government appointed a Committee with Ashok Mehta as chairman and was entrusted with the task of enquiring into the causes responsible for the poor performance of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions. It was also asked to suggest measures to strengthen *Panchayati Raj* Institutions. The committee suggested two tier system of *Panchayati Raj* consisting of Zilla Parishads at the district level and *Mandal Panchayats* at the grass root level as against three tier system suggested by the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee. The committee recommended constitutional protection to the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions and further decentralization of power at all levels. A noteworthy feature of the report is that it recommended regular elections to these bodies and open participation of political parties.

To extend people's participation in developmental activities, the Ashok Mehta Committee suggested reservation of seats for the weaker sections, adequate financial resources for the *Panchayats* along with constitutional sanctions.

4. G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985)

The G.V.K. Rao Committee was appointed to once again look at various aspects of PRIs. The Committee was of the opinion that a total view of rural development must be taken in which PRIs must play a central role in handling people's problems. It recommended the following:

- i. PRIs have to be activated and provided with all the required support to become effective organizations,

- ii. PRIs at district level and below should be assigned the work of planning, implementation and monitoring of rural development programmes, and
- iii. The block development office should be the spinal cord of the rural development process.

INITIATIVES IN NINETIES

The process of decentralization took centre stage in mid 80's and 90's as it was realized that decentralization help to reduce poverty which results from regional disparities by paying more attention to the attendant socio-economic factors and lead to a gradual increase in development efforts. The debate on decentralization began during the decade of 1980s/1990s. However there is no consensus as to whether granting too much power to the grass root institutions would help in shifting the arena of politics from above to grass root level. Even there are no consensus about the implication of such transfer of power on to different social categories, particularly women, *dalits* and tribal.

Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India took the major initiative in this direction and introduced the 64th Amendment bill on local government on the 15th May, 1989 in the Parliament, but it failed to get the required support. A second attempt was made in September 1990 to pass the bill in the Parliament. The bill however was not even taken up for consideration. In September 1991, the Congress government under P. V Narasimha Rao introduced a fresh bill on *Panchayati Raj*, the then Prime Minister. It was passed in 1992 as the 73rd Amendment Act 1992 with minor modifications and came into force on 24th April 1993. It was meant to provide constitutional sections to establish democracy at the state and national level.

THE 73RD CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ACT

The Act provided for the establishment of *Gram Sabha* in each village. It will be a body comprising of all the adult members registered as voters in the *Panchayat* area. There shall be a 5 three-tier system of *Panchayat* at village, intermediate and district levels. Smaller states with population below 20 Lakhs will have option not to have intermediate level *Panchayat*. Seats in *Panchayats* at all three level shall be filled by direct election. In addition, the chairperson of the village *Panchayat* can be made member of the *Panchayat* at the intermediate level. MP, MLA, MLC, could also be member of *Panchayat* at the intermediate and the district level. In all the *Panchayats*, seats should be reserved for SCs and STs in proportion to their population and 1/3 of the total number of seats will be reserved for women. Offices of the chairperson of the *Panchayat* at all levels shall be reserved in favor of SCs and STs in proportion in the state. One-third of the offices of chairperson of *Panchayats* at all levels shall also be reserved for women. Legislature of the state shall be at liberty to provide reservation of seats and office of chairperson in *Panchayat* in favor of backward class citizens.

Panchayats shall have a uniform five year term and elections to constitute new bodies shall be completed before the expiry of term. In the event of dissolution, election will be compulsorily held within six months. The reconstituted *Panchayat* will serve for remaining period of five year term. It will not be possible to dissolve the existing *Panchayats* by amendment of any Act before the expiry of its duration.

A person who is disqualified under any law, election to the legislature of the state or under any of the state will not be entitled to become a member of a *Panchayat*. Independent election commission will be established in the state to superintendence, direction, and control of the electoral process and preparation of electoral rolls. For the implementation of development schemes, main responsibility will be entrusted to the *Panchayats*.

The *Panchayats* will receive adequate funds for carrying out their plans. Grants from state government will constitute an important source of funding but state government is also expected to assign the revenue of certain taxes to the *Panchayats*. In some cases, *Panchayat* will also be permitted to collect and retain revenue it raises. In each state, finance commission will be established within one year and after every five years to determine principles on the basis of which adequate financial resource would be entrusted for *Panchayats*.

Panchayats existing on the 24th April 1993 will be allowed to complete their full term except when they are dissolved by the house by resolution.

WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM

Gender had never been an issue in *Panchayati Raj* system till recent times. During ancient period, it was not that women could not join politics, but the fact was that they did not take interest in it due to a patriarchal set up. The British through their ruthless method of revenue collection and the introduction of „*Zamindari Land Tenure*’ system almost destroyed these ancient republics. The British were of the view that “Vote of Women” would be premature in the Indian society and continued to enforce purdah and prohibition against women’s education. In 1980, only 10.0 per cent of world’s parliamentarians were women. The figure rose to 14.8 per cent in 1988 and it came down to 12.7 per cent in 1997.

Though the Constitution of India provides equality of status to Indian women with men but there always exists a gap between theory and practice. It is not merely equality under law that determines the status of women in a society but tradition and customs are more powerful than law in determining women’s position within a social structure.

RESERVATION FOR WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

It was proposed in the National Perspective Plan for Women (NPPW in Oct 1998) , that there should be reservation for women in *Panchayats* and *Zilla Parishads* to increase their political participation. It recommended that “reservation should be made of 30 per cent seats at *Panchayat* and *Zilla Parishad* level and local municipal bodies for women”. It also recommended that “wherever possible, higher representation of *Dalits/Tribals*, women of weaker sections should be ensured”.

Women’s entry into the local government in such large numbers, often more than required 33.3 percent, and their success in campaigning, including the defeat of male candidates, has shattered the myth that women are not interested in politics and have no time to go to meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party processes. PRI reminds us of a central truth: power is not something people give away. It has to be negotiated, and sometimes wrested from the powerful.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Indian Constitution have served a breakthrough towards ensuring equal access and increased participation in political power structure for women. This was considered as a land mark in our democratic history and was expected to provide the *Panchayats* opportunities for better management of local resources for their balanced and rational utilization plan and implement the need based programmes and managed or generate additional resources according to their needs and priorities. This act was extremely important for the political empowerment of women. The idea behind this move was to enable more women at the grass root level to enter in the political stream and create “Critical mass” of women leaders whose voices are heard at various levels.

73rd Constitution Amendment Act in India focused on political structures and processes of rural India and vulnerable populations. Participation of women in *Panchayati Raj* Institutions was questioned in terms of the substance and effectiveness of representation. Rural women were particularly vulnerable as a group because of strong traditional values maintained in rural areas, patriarchal families, lack of women's education and access to information, poor exposure to the "outside" world, and lack of power. Local committees insufficiently represented women. Women were rarely heads of *Panchayats* and needed the lower positions to advance within the system. 7 The National Perspective Plan of 1988 provided for over 33 per cent of seats for women and minorities as members and chairpersons of *Panches* and *Sarpanches*, based on proportional representation in the total population. Greater participation of women in politics was viewed as dependent not just on fulfilling the law but on assuring principles, democratic, and meaningful administration of government. Effort was equally necessary to address attitudinal, social, and structural barricades. Women needed to know where and how to direct their concerns so that solutions were found to the problems women faced. Women members of *Panchayats* needed to be educated and informed about politics: their rights, the nature of

Indian democracy, policies and programs for women and voting rights. Women needed financial support for running for office. Women must view themselves as representatives of all people. Women's centers and other organizations can serve as catalysts to mobilize women and help solve political dilemmas. A combination of constitutional provisions, government policies, social action, and self awareness among rural women will eventually result in Indian women becoming part of the mainstream political power sharing and decision making.

Though the *Panchayat* system of guiding and directing the process of development in the rural areas is not new in India, yet the unique feature of 73rd Amendment is that it brought new life to these institutions by making it mandatory that women should be adequately represented in these bodies. It is an accepted fact that Indian women in general and the rural women in particular are relatively powerless with a little or no control over the resources and decision-making authority due to prevailing patriarchal ideology, which promotes the value of submission, sacrifice, obedience and silent suffering. The reservation of seats, in the 1993-94 elections has brought in about 800,000 women into the political process in a single election (Poornima and Vyasulu 1999).

Panchayati Raj institutions today offer a deeply cherished goal and a creative tool to usher in all round rural development. In fact it sounds wonderful to hear politician's bureaucrats and the media address, PRIs as the most potent grassroots level developmental agency of the people, by the people and for the people (Verma 1997). The PRI has also brought about significant transformations in the lives of women themselves, who have become empowered, and have gained self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of their own identity. The *Panchayat* villages have become political training grounds to women, many of them illiterate, who are now leaders in the village *Panchayats*.

Women leaders in the *Panchayati Raj* are transforming local governance by sensitizing the State to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice. Through the PRI, they are tackling issues that had previously gone virtually unacknowledged, including water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence. The participation of women in the PRI's is considered essential not only for ensuring political participation in the democratic process but also for realizing the developmental goals. Participation of women in PRI's 8 involves women as voters, women as members of political parties, women as candidates, women as elected members of PRI's taking part in decision-making, planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes, women as members of Mahila Mandals and their association with various organizations.

One third of the seats in local bodies- *Gram* or village *Panchayats*, municipalities, city corporations and district bodies – are "reserved" for women. This means the contests can only be between women in these constituencies. The first step in enabling women to participate has been taken.

WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM: SOME ISSUES

The functioning of *Panchayati Raj* Institutions in the state shows that they have not fully emerged as peoples institutions. New class of power centers usually occupied by elite is emerging. *Gram sabha* has not been successful in ensuring downward mobility. In the recent years any change in government has resulted in changes in *Panchayati Raj* system. Every government seeks to strengthen its support at the grass root level against the opposition. This has led to women being pushed into the *Panchayati Raj* system only for holding on to power by the male members of their families and the political parties to create a stronghold at the grass root level.

There are many more issues related to the reproductive and productive role of women. They share responsibilities of village administration in addition to their farm, home based and social responsibilities. They attend to people's problems and have irregular hours of work. It disturbs the harmony of home and family life. Besides, they feel physically insecure when they go out to attend *Panchayat* meetings (Mathew 1994).

In particular, unless specific conditions are met, women face multiple hurdles and find it difficult to participate in political process that has previously been a male stronghold. The reasons for this are gender specific. Women are less mobile than men. They have domestic responsibilities, which

put limits on the time they can spend in such processes (Poornima and Vyasulu 1999). The status of women is not uniform in all the rural areas of the country. Variations can be seen from place to place and even within the same population groups living in different ecological cultural settings. Factors like, rules of residence, descent, in heritage, marriage, divorce and degree of acculturation, urbanization, modernization and many such factors contribute to the variation.

Studies on *Panchayati Raj system* indicate that women representatives are merely ornamental in nature and political consciousness is found lacking among them. They are members on record only. Allegedly, they are not consulted while taking decisions. Thus, women representatives are not free from male dominance in the village administration and no significant change in the power equation is observed in the villages. Need is felt to make women aware of their role in all spheres of *Panchayat* activities (Mathew 1993). 9 Reservation of one-third seats in *Panchayat* for them is a silent revolution to improve the status of women. An important problem of our society is the persistence of gender bias in social, political and economic spheres. Traditionally, women are considered to be weak and inferior to men. Women suffer from low self-esteem because of social subjugation and lack of economic independence.

KNOWLEDGE GAP

In a developing country like India the traditional culture has not changed much to do away the dichotomy of society. Culturally women are expected to perform only reproductive role. This is further strengthened by social ethos, in which, women are conditioned to live as per the feminine concept imposed upon her by tradition and society. She is the symbol of sacrifice, obedience and welfare. The mother's role has been much glorified that compromising on that role and taking up politics as a career becomes difficult.

When the 73rd Amendment Act came into force, the elected women had very little exposure to the political system. The studies conducted in Punjab in this context date back to early years after the amendment came into force. Now with passage of more than a decade, the roles of women in the system need to be analyzed to play an effective role in a system. It is however, mandatory to understand the system. The women need to aware of their roles and responsibilities as a member of these institutions. In this context, the present study has been planned in one of the most developed district of Punjab to analyze the role of women in *Gram Panchayats*. This will provide database for planning strategies to politically empower them in particular areas of concern so that they can understand and undertake their role more effectively. Decentralization of power at the grass root level is only beneficial if men and women both are equally empowered to undertake their role effectively as members of the *Panchayati Raj* System.

The 73rd Amendment Act of 1993 is revolutionary step in the direction of political empowerment of women as it provides statutory status to *Panchayats* and provides 33 per cent reservation of seats for women. However, it is still an unfinished social task because of lack of participation of women in politics. Political participation of women is ideal for integrating and involving them in the development activities that aim at economic success. Development projects are unlikely to succeed unless full and informed participation of rural women in them is ensured. Women look at development in a different perspective and can play a vital role in the development process.

Hence the present study entitled "Role of Women Members in *Gram Panchayats*" was undertaken to provide data for further strengthening of their role. The study aimed at achieving the following objectives: 10

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To profile the women members of *Gram Panchayat* in hyderabad Karnataka, and women members awareness through media.
2. To study their level of awareness regarding through media.
 - a. Constitution of *Gram Panchayat* for women's.
 - b. Functions of *Gram Panchayat*.

c. Powers of *Gram Panchayat*.

d. Duties of the members of *Gram Panchayat*.

3. To study the role of medias in level of participation of women gram panchayat members in functioning of *Panchayat*.

4. To study the role of medias analyze the relationship between the socio, personal and political characteristics of the members and their

a. Level of awareness

b. Level of participation

IMPLICATIONS

i. The study will provide media support base regarding awareness of women *Panchayat* members with respect to constitution, functioning, functions, duties and powers, their participation in *Gram Panchayat* and involvement in *Panchayati Raj* system.

ii. The women cannot make use of the reservation provisions independently and objectively if the whole election process and its consequent political activities are through proxy. The data generated through this study can form the basis for planning capacity building strategies to create more awareness, improve participation and motivate women to enable them for more proactive role in decision making process in PRI.

iii. The study provides for an insight into the role of various socio-economic and personal characteristics of the WPM and how these can be used to enhance the role of women in the PRI.

LIMITATIONS

The present study has been subjected to the following limitations:

i. The present study has been conducted in Hydrabad Karnataka region in Karnataka. Thus, the inferences derived from the media investigation regarding the Role of Women Members in *Gram Panchayats* may not be, therefore, entirely applicable to the rest of the state or the country.

ii. The data is based upon the perception / response of the WPM. This may vary if personal observations, knowledge tests and case studies are conducted

iii. As the respondents of the present study were women therefore the results may vary in cases made by taking respondents from both sexes.

CONCLUSION

After going through the results of various studies, it may be concluded that reservation under *Panchayati Raj* for the rural women was in a state in flux at present and the women were not adequately empowered to play an effective role because of social, economic and political factors. As the studies were from different states, the role of women was also different; as in the States, like Kerala and Karnataka, where all the woman members were invited for decision-making process and their views were respected.

Women members were illiterate, married and the male members of the families influenced their decisions and in most cases it happened to be the husband of the member. Literature reviewed also points that women were very new to the *Panchyati Raj* system, as majority of them had no experience of working with any organization.

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