

Women as Proxies in Grampanchayat. Did Affirmative action in Local bodies empower Women in rural India ?

“ The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments, enacted under the leadership of Rajivji, gave a new lease of life to Panchayati Raj. We now have over 22 lakh elected representatives in panchayats, a truly remarkable number by any yardstick. Reservations for women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in panchayats has combined political empowerment with social empowerment. Earlier fears about elite groups capturing these institutions have been allayed. Indeed, the share of women has substantially exceeded the reserved quota with around 50,000 women elected from general unreserved categories. This is a remarkable success in bringing lakhs and lakhs of women into the mainstream of governance. It is particularly worth underlining that the primary reason for this is that a larger proportion of SC/ST women are getting elected over and above the 1/3rd reserved quota. I think it would be fair to say that there are now more women in India in positions of elective authority than in the rest of the world put together ”

— Dr.Manmohan Singh speech, The state of the Panchayat, Nov 2, 2006.

INTRODUCTION

One of the key objectives of Indian democracy is to maintain “Inclusivity”, where sections that were oppressed and subjugated for centuries should be given political power so that their voices can be heard in legislatures and appropriate legislation can be brought to uplift them and to change the course of social and political trajectory in India, creating equilibrium in the society. Towards this end many laws were passed by the parliament among them is the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendment acts, which gave constitutional power to the local bodies and created a hierarchical third-tier institutional setup, augmenting decentralization, creating more sustainable power and political structure at the grassroots level to make the democratic setup more representative and responsive. Local self-government is crucial not only for restoring the self-esteem of the villagers, but also for reducing the burden of the state government. It also helps in mitigating the alienation of the rural people as they became aware of the fact that they are being consulted and their voice is being heard in the governance of their affairs by the state and centre (Chandrasekhar, 2011, p.1). These amendments gave a 33 % reservation to women in local bodies to promote the political participation of women in the decision making process and public policy and to bridge the gender gap in politics at the local level, where the society is still running on patriarchal lines and aristocrat behaviour. This legislation also made local Self-government more representative and participatory. But most of the women in rural

areas who are illiterate, even though literate are acting as proxies to their male relatives, who have real power vested in them in governing Gram panchayat. Men who are making village politics their fiefdom are making sure that women act like “Rubber stamp” leaving virtual power in their hands, while they being instrumental in real local governance without even getting elected. Women who are elected couldn't take part in policy formation and act independently due to the fabricated societal pressure and economic constraints. This paper is an attempt to understand whether representation in local self-government empowered women or did they become proxies in governing.

Women as Proxies in Local Self Government

Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of power. It is aimed at decentralizing authority and getting the participation of the deprived sections in the decision-making process. Empowerment of women will not only make them independent but also strengthen pluralist politics and develop Representative democracy, where women will have the opportunity to self determine and address their issues which are of primary importance.

The fact that women are capable of exhibiting exemplary qualities of leadership is borne out by participation of women in the Indian independence movement and leading national politics in democratic independent India. The latest rise of Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mayawati, Mamata Banerjee, Nirmala Seetharaman is an example towards that end. Political Rights of Women in India first surfed in 1921 reforms act, where the right to vote given to Women with some constraints and again in 1935 Act, where it liberalized some old norms and brought more women into the sphere of political participation. Finally, when India constituted its constitution in 1950, it promised Equality of status and opportunity and Justice in all aspects; Social, Economic, and Political. And again in the 1980s, Finally amending the constitution in 1993. The 73rd Amendment which brought the practice of direct democracy had been beneficial to the rural people and laid a path towards more sustainable politics. This Panchayat raj act of 1992 is a milestone in the country's democratic history. At present, there are 1.3 million women in Panchayat raj institutions which constitute 44.2 percent of total representatives. Women Sarpanch accounts for nearly 43 percent of total gram panchayats across the country. Among 29 states almost 15 states reserved 50 percent quota for women in PRI's. The 73rd amendment is both a remarkable democratic achievement and a staggering defeat. It is a success for the reason that it decentralized governance and enhanced the rural participation in governance and failure because although it gave reservation to women and marginalized it made them only representatives, without really empowering them. Male relatives of the women representatives often take power from the women, taking advantage of her position in the artificially fabricated society. Women representatives in rural areas although don't

face any kind of formal barriers, but the Cultural barriers like gender roles and Financial constraints, Free movement, Low level of literacy, Non-party affiliation became inextricable knot with their problems.

Reasons for Women becoming proxies in local self governance :

Gender Roles:

India still strives to register its own version of 'Pink wave' revolution in Local bodies and at the National legislatures. Typical gender roles inculcated through the Brahmanic era echoes across India. Women who are elected are also expected to pay heed to their gender roles like raising children, remain centre of attraction with their work during Religious ceremonies, Care elderly, Engage in domestic works upholding typical Indian "Sthree Dharma" which is hampering their active political presence.

The gender role ideology is used as an ideological tool by patriarchy to place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere. This is one of the vital factors that shape the level of women's political participation globally. However, this ideological divide is not reflective of the reality. The boundaries between public and private are often blurred in the daily lives of women. Women have to negotiate their entry into and claim on public space according to the discursive and material opportunities available in a given culture and society (Farzana Bari, 2005, p.4) Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, with regard to Gender and Politics have argued that perceptions of appropriate gender roles in politics are 'shaped by broader patterns of societal values and priorities, which in turn rest on economic development and religious traditions.' Although power is vested in women through legislation, it couldn't free them from typical gender roles which remained a barrier to their rise in politics and always exacerbated their political growth. Comparatively women in villages are subjected to remain and stick to the old norms of performing gender roles in the social structure fabricated by dominant male associations. Pradhan pati's taking advantage of these artificially created circumstances explicitly excluding "Female Pradhan's" from political involvement and mobilisation.

All Men Institution :

According to the International Labour Organization's Global Employment trade 2013 report, out of 131 countries for which data was available, India ranks 11th from the bottom in female labour force participation (FLLP) and India's labour force participation rate for women fell from just over 37 percent in 2004-05 to 29 percent in 2009-10 (Data Courtesy: ILO). And also according to the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) data reveals falling FLLP from over 40% in the mid-1990s to 29% in 2004-05, to 23% in

2009-10 and 22.5% by 2011-12. Although RTE 2009 and Schemes like Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, are schemed by central governments, they couldn't provide education to girls crossing all societal construct and couldn't provide them a place in the Government offices of Village Level, Block level and District Level. Even in most of the cases the Village Revenue Officer and Panchayat Secretary appointed by the Government are Males. Due to the male-dominated office climate Women leaders often find trouble working with them or co-ordinating with them in a participatory development approach. Because of this reason Men tend to look after the Panchayat work related to Govt. approval and sideline women, subsequently becoming "Pradhan Pati ". Political empowerment doesn't only mean that laying power in the hands of Women but also creating an ecosystem where she can sustain and co-ordinate with others building her political network to the next level. Without her participation in the decision-making process, in a direct democratic setup, merely here election to the office doesn't empower her.

Literacy

High level of literacy and educational achievements leads to greater development, awareness, and empowerment of women and girls. Education leads to greater control over their lives and choice. World Bank studies have established the direct and functional relationship between literacy and productivity on the one hand and literacy and the overall quality of human life on the other. Illiteracy among rural women stands out one of the main reasons for proxy politics in rural areas. Women rather than framing policies stand merely as spectators in the functioning of the Gram panchayat. According to the 2011 census, female literacy in Rural areas stands at 57.93 % compared to 77.15% of Male literacy. The literacy rate in SC women in rural areas is 52.6% against 72 % of male literacy. The literacy rate in rural ST women is still worse at 46.94 % lower than 50%. It is evident that some women, in general, are neglected in gram panchayat and women who belong to marginal groups are further secluded and marginalized. In most cases women elected to the municipal councils come mainly from higher castes and have higher levels of education and higher professions, women in the rural panchayats frequently come from the lower castes, and are landless, illiterate, married, and under the age of forty, with no prior political experience (Lakshmi, Jyoti, and Sharma 2000; Mehta 2002). Under the fiscal decentralization, gram Sabha receives funds from the Union government, devolutions from the state government, Grants from State government for some specially designed schemes. All these revenue matters should be coordinated by the Village Representative with the village Revenue Secretary. And the matters of Budget and audit should also be taken care of by the representative. In India, most of the rural women who remains illiterate depend on their husbands and immediate male counterpart to deal with this financial matters, sun-consciously/ Consciously vesting power in male hands. Men taking advantage of this educational constraints in governance, assumes power with " Sarpanch pati" name. In case if the

woman sarpanch tries to act at her discretion she will be socially secluded by her parents and husband saying “ Unnecessary female political intervention”.

Financial Constraints :

Although there has been tremendous progress in recent decades, gender gaps in economic opportunities and political participation persist in many countries, with some gender differences being larger in developing countries like India. Women’s access to the property and productive resources remain weak and often dependent on males. Moreover, many jobs continue to be segregated by gender, with women more likely to be employed in low-paying jobs, as unpaid family workers, or in the informal sector—contributing to the gender gap in earnings. According to the Deloitte report titled “Empowering Women and Girls In India” for the fourth industrial revolution, 95% or 195 Million women are employed in the unorganized sector unpaid for their work. Women without income now have to depend on their father/Brother/Husband to contest in the panchayat raj elections because “Democracy doesn’t come cheap”. Election commission following the state law sets the ceiling for the gram panchayat poll expenditure. Recently Telangana state under its New Panchayat Raj Act 2018, has set the limit for poll expenditure at 2.5 lakhs from 80,000 rupees in villages more than 5,000 population and 1.5 lakhs for villages less than 5,000 population. Similarly, According to the new amendment made to the Bihar panchayat Election rules, 2006 the election spending for the Mukhiya post has been increased from 25,000 to 40,000 rupees in 2016. In Tamil Nadu, the ceiling is set at 34,000 rupees and In Punjab, it is 30,000. Women who don’t have sources of income depend on their male counterparts for election expenditure and for launching a successful electoral campaign. After winning the elections power shifts to the Sarpanch Pati, women merely becoming proxy after all her Husband/Brother funded her to run for election. In some of the cases even though women don’t want to take part in elections, she has to listen to the male member because she is dependent on him, if she stands out against decision there might be high chances of facing abuse leading.

Paid in Pittance

MP'S, MLA's, MLC'S who frame the law in this country are entitled to salary and the fund is drawn from the Consolidated Fund of India. These elected representatives set salaries for themselves. Unlike these MLA's and MP's local body representatives do not get a salary or paid pittance. The Kerala government which has been a forerunner in many issues provides incentives for the local body representatives. It pays 19,000 for the Village head (Sarpanch) and 15,000 for the Ward members. Although these monetary incentives couldn't stop proxy politics in Kerala it was instrumental in bringing the Women and other vulnerable groups into politics. Odisha and Bihar government pays honorarium rupees 2000 for the local body representatives, West Bengal hiked the salary from 3000 to 2000 previously. In Tamil Nadu, they get 2000 rupees as honorarium. With the rising capitalism and free-market economy, a mere 2000 wouldn't be sufficient to live and to work for the community selflessly. Women who get into politics don't get any incentives and they subsequently depend on their Husbands and Fathers for sustenance, becoming economically powerless. Women who couldn't empower themselves, subsequently question their own capabilities to empower those marginalised sections. Again with meagre income/No income, she has to depend on her husband/Male dependant, where he trades food and shelter for power, making them proxies.

Office of Profit

According to the existing law, No elected representative is expected to have Office of Profit under the state govt or central government. Some women who have jobs under the state government had to resign because of the conflict of interest. When she gets elected she starts facing financial constraints and had to face many challenges including political pressures from the above. If she moves against the will of "Elites" during her term as a Sarpanch she faces harassment after the term is over because there is a low chance that she stands for the election for the second time. Dalit Women, Adivasi women, and Women who belong to the depressed classes don't even have a chance to work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment guarantee act (MNREGA), because of the existing law. Rajanikandham, a Dalit female, who heads the Nachangulam village panchayat, Tamil Nadu quotes "I hold an office, I have power and prestige but no income. I get no salary from the panchayat and I can't work for wages under MGNREGA because I am panchayat president, All I have are three goats I got under a government scheme (Interview India Spend by Bhanu Priya Rao, 2018). With conflict of interest with the job and elected position, women leave their jobs and depend on the income of their male counterpart, eventually transferring power to male, because he's the sole breadwinner now.

Lobbying

Every village has a different social composition and Economic condition in India. One village might be relatively richer than the other village due to favourable factors like availability of Natural resources and Physical infrastructure. If the additional resources are required for the uplifting of the poor, Farmers, or Daily Wage labours then the Sarpanch has to lobby with the District Magistrate to get funds issued. District magistrates in some cases might be located very far from the village and women have to spend long hours in the office and with the male-dominated network of higher officials. In the worst cases, she will be abused and have to deal with slanders made by villagers and others. In that case, men in their family assume power and make her act like “Rubber Stamp”, where her signatures matter more than her opinion and perspective.

Citizen Candidate Model

The citizen Candidate Model postulates politics without any Political party. Any citizen can run for the office without association with any Political party. Grampanchayat elections in all the states run on this formula, where the sarpanch doesn't need to have any political party affiliation, elections to the post are done with the independent symbols allowed to the candidates. Sarpanch women who aren't affiliated with the ruling party do not get any additional funds, unless or until her husband is affiliated. In case if Pradhan Pati is affiliated with the governing political party he assumes responsibilities as Sarpanch, making his wife proxy because he has more bargaining power and he's part of the Party in power. For Instance, Manjula who heads Mallachandaram panchayat in Tamil Nadu managed to get 26 Crore rupees to her penchant, because of the reason her husband is a member of district Unit of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Interview India Spend) And also due to the reason Women sarpanch don't have active political profile their leadership limits to the local area and doesn't experience any transition to State Politics.

Conclusion :

Constituting Panchayat's and reservation of seats in Panchayats was a revolutionary step for the empowerment of Women. However, government should bring laws to curb the practice of “Pradhan Pati”. Mere representation doesn't give power to women in rural areas. Furthermore, government should start mentoring programmes and instil confidence in the rural women. Reservation shouldn't only empower women representatives, it should also empower those are casting vote and being active in local

governance. Empowerment should not only be political it should also be Economical, Social and Cultural.

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