

Women in Local Governance

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Introduction

India's Ninth Five-year plan and the recent Mid-Term review have noted that the benefits from the development programmes have largely been appropriated by the local elite. Gram Sabhas and Panchayat Meeting are favoured by ensuring the interests of poor. The participating women and SC/ST members represented these interests by their participation. The 73rd and 74th Amendments envisage the village panchayat as a forum and action point to address the local issues with local solutions and a real local remedy in bureaucratic, top-down schemes. The national goals and aspirations are in support of decentralization, while implementing we need to address concerns for inclusiveness, accountability and effectiveness.

Elected Women's Representations in PRI- Backdrop

Since 1970s before the 73rd Amendment, women in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra had been contesting elections, occupying reserved positions and participating in panchayats. Number village in Pune district of Maharashtra had oldest known all women panchayat between 1963-68. The all women panchayat represented for resolving the issues like drinking water supply, the installation of pumps the construction of wells, playgrounds, roads. Public toilets and other community infrastructure; the closure of liquor vends; more effective control over school; and even the transfer of land from men to their wives.

The all –women panchayat were not elected but they emerged due to the women's initiatives and the factionalism of men in the villages. In Maharashtra, the dominant sugar barons, wanted puppet panchayats they could control to preserve their vested rural interests. The Shatkari Sunghatan encouraged the women to enter in politics, such panchayats came to power without elections for requirements of opposite panel. The most women sarpanches belonged local rural political elite families thus the local class and caste structure reflected. The obstacles to the effective participation of women, are not very different from those in other states: patriarchy, illiteracy, lack of information, bureaucracy, lack of financial powers, and so on. The picture suggested in terms women empowerment broadly similar to that emerging from some post amendment studies enhanced social recognition and respect feeling of self-confidence greater mobility, awareness and knowledge, and in some cases, even enhanced status with the family.

Women Contesting Elections to the New Panchayats. by May- June 1994 the first state to conduct and complete elections to all three tiers was Madhya Pradesh Other States-including Tripura, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh conducted elections under the new acts, between 1994 and 1995. Punjab excluded the lowest tier. the Karnataka conformity Act was passed in May, 1993, followed by Gram Panchayat elections in December of the same year. Orissa, West Bengal and Maharashtra conducted elections, with 33 percent reservation for women, after the Amendment, but before the State conformity acts were enacted. Himachal

Pradesh and Punjab had elections after the Amendment and before the conformity Acts were passed-no reservation for women was mentioned or given 700, 000 elected women were introduced to panchayat raj institutions across the country in the panchayat election. The statistics² show that, the most states have met-and some have even exceeded –the one third quota for women’s reservation at the Gram Panchayat Level a few are exceptions. The other States, which substantially exceeded the 33 percent quota, include Goa, Kerala, Manipur, West Bengal and Daman and Diu. At the Panchayat Samiti Level elections, Assam, Punjab and undivided Uttar Pradesh were below the quota. Karnataka against exceeded with 40% women representatives. At the Zila Parishad level elections, Uttar Pradesh 25.40% remained the major far behind trailer apart from States like Sikkim and Union territories like Chandigarh and Dadra and Nagar Haveli. Only Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa and Tamil Nadu met quota at all three tiers, for women chairperson. West Bengal recorded surprisingly low 4.62% at Gram Panchayat, 3% at Panchayat Samiti and 0% at Zila Parishad. “A study of approximately 850 women representatives, across three States, show that 49.5% women were elected unopposed at gram panchayat level and, at all levels, were the member seats were unopposed rather than the chairpersons. In Madhya Pradesh, women have even been elected to seats which were not reserved for them (CWDS, 1999)” A study of two district in Tamil Nadu, which surveyed 100 women members, found that 88 of them had won from constituencies reserved for women and 7 from constituencies reserved for the Scheduled Castes, though open to both men and women. (Athreya et al,1998)”⁴ A study of Angul district in Orissa showed that 33 out of 53 ward –members were elected unopposed, and two were elected from unreserved constituencies. (ISED, 1998) “Women Representatives-Social and Economic.

Aspects Literacy Level

The illiterate and barely literate women are the major entrants in the new PRI. It is found that the 25% EWRs from Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan were unable to read and write. In Tamil Nadu, Orissa and the Garhwal region of U.P. the illiterate women representative are 3% educated up to the primary school level 23% and college educated are 9.5% (Kaushik 1998).

Income and Occupation

40 percent of the women representatives surveyed belong to families below poverty line income group 14.2% of them are landless.19.5% have marginal holdings and 20.6% have small holdings only 33% of all those surveyed had an annual income over Rs. 20,000. (CWDS 1999) The occupation wise 50% what is long for EWR s are as cultivators, while 40% are housewives (supporting dominant household occupation or business) (Kaushik 1998).“The CWDS study reports 37.2% women as housewives and 38.3% as cultivators, with 10.2% being cultivators and labourers” (CWDS1999). “The highest percentage, in terms of caste, among both members and chairpersons is that of OBCs (28.9 % and 30.3% respectively)” (CWDS 1999). “The highest percentage, in terms of caste, among both members and chairpersons i that of OBCs (28.9 percent and 30.3 percent respectively)” (CWDS1999). “The women representative from Madhya Pradesh, from Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu were Mostly from the OBCs However, in the upper caste dominated hill region of U.P. and in Haryana (where Hadvs are closer to the high castes), most women representative belong to the upper caste “(Kaushik 1998) In Karnataka, the land owing upper castes. The Vokkaligas, are predominant. (Vidya, 1977) In Orissa, where 66 percent of the elected Women in the State are from the Karan and Khandyat castes and the percentage of scheduled castes and tribes among the upaarpanches in lower than that of other castes. The lowest castes are found to dominate in ward membership only. (Srinivas 1998: 24-5).

Age

Pertaining to the age profile of EWRs the Kaushik study show that the 74% EWRs belonged to the 20-40 age group. While CWDS study shows that 69% EWRs were below 45 years of age. Both studies confirmed that the 90% and above EWRs were married.

Family Background

Madhya Pradesh Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh had the major first timers EWRs to panchayat 3/ had previous experience to of participations to panchayat only 20% EWR s had membership of a political party in proportion to their natal and final families a prior political engagement of these women had been a very low (CWDS 1999) in Haryana 50% of the respondents had very first exposure to political activity as neither they nor other members of their families had any previous experience If political engagement (MARG) High levels If political affiliation are reported from states like Tamil Nadu where 62 percent If women panchayat members in two districts claimed involvement in party enrolment addressing public meetings and collecting funds (Athreya 1998 17-18) In the study If Madhya Pradesh Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan Dalit and tribal women are seen to consistently report higher levels If political affiliation (CWDS 1999: 89) What prompted women to contest.

Women's Awareness of Panchayati Raj

The Karnataka study reports that 19.35% of EWRs knew about the Panchayati raj legislation in detail, while the remaining were aware of its contents in general terms. The Haryana study shows that the knowledge of women's representatives about Panchayati raj institutions was limited to their traditional functions only and their were unaware of the New Haryana Panchati act and the function assigned to panchayats under it. The procedural aspects of welfare schemes, and the financial powers of Panchayat bodies were not known to them as well (MARG, 1998-:87-90). The level of awareness about panchayat related matters did not vary gender wise. If 18.7% female members and chairpersons of panchayats had no knowledge about panchayat matters, so do 16.2% of their male colleagues. (CWDS, 1999:99). In Tamil Nadu, women in panchayats are talking interest in panchayat finances, though they report some confusion about the relationship between the three tiers.(Athreya, 1998:22) In Garhawal, Uttar Pradesh, women representatives are aware of the new Panchayati raj system, and the value of reservation, there are a few who believe it is meaningless in the absence of real devolution of powers (Verma, 1998: 38)10. Again, the lack of knowledge mostly pertains to finances, budgeting and accounting.

Women's Activities

The women do address the more vital needs of women. They work on schemes for braining piped water into village, inspect development works and nutrition centre sunder the ICDS; and pay particular attention to children's education. They also take the initiative in a variety of family and matrimonial matters, from counselling abusive or alcoholic husbands to settling land disputes. (CWDS, 1999, 137) In west Bengal, Kamala Mahato, the panchayat Pradhan of Bandoan in Purulia district, stands first among their achievements the 10 wells that she has had dug for drinking water as well as irrigation, and the income generating schemes for women under the Integrated Rural Development Programme. (Panchayat Update, April 1998.) Gender Inequality and Gender Exclusion in PRIs Gender bias must be excluded from every walk of life. It has many forms. Several modes of gender exclusion can be considered. The more oppressive the structures of patriarchy and caste are, the more obstacles to the to the empowerment of women through Panchayati raj institutions to face, be it anywhere. on the other hand, the lesser the caste structures, relatively lesser the oppression and the weaker the patriarchy due to male migration or social mores, the lesser constricted participation of women in panchayat institutions are.

The physical violence to which women and lower caste/ scheduled caste representatives alike have been subjected, is one of the most extreme form of social constraints. Both male and female members and chairpersons of panchayats are affected equally by the institutional constraints. These include: the inadequate devolution of powers, and of financial powers in particular, in many states; the lack of specification about the relationship between the three tiers; and the relationship between the bureaucracy and the elected representatives institutional constraints vary state to state, depending mostly on the provisions of the

conformity acts, the administrative and political climate, and the organizational norms and values that characterize it.

Conclusion

The available evidence makes us to understand. That this is long, slow but irreversible route to empowerment of women. Panchayats are performing a transformatory role but slow, in spite of many negative trends-surrogate representation and tokenism-exhibited in the practice of women's representation in panchayats. The consciousness raising function of the new PRIs is indubitable. For the first time women have squarely recognized, their being the state of powerlessness. It is the reality now this recognition pertaining to the powerlessness in the domain outside the domestic, it is only a matter of time before powerlessness within the walls of their homes also begins to get recognized. Likewise, illiteracy, the bottleneck to development recognized, is the first step towards combating it. The importance of the transformatory potential of such trends is unmistakable and cannot be underestimated. Empowering women through quotas in local institutions clearly does not alter the preconditions in terms of materialistic gains such as providing women with access to land, but it does provide them with a non-material political resource through which they can bring about a change in the norms and values governing the distribution of material resources, over the period of time. The women recognized the importance of girl education and a later age of marriage, for instance, may be the prelude to the assertion of other kinds of equality-claims. Similarly, the participation of women in panchayats, as much as their frequent exclusion from the actual proceeding in these bodies, has created an awareness of alternative roles and a more positive self-image than those internalized over a lifetime of patriarchally defined gender identity. Democratization is a process, so is empowerment. So called male dominated social set up cannot last long. They can be negotiated and altered by political action and social change. The participation of women in panchayats is certainly on mechanism through which such change can take place, and the strategic gender interests of women advanced. The women are playing significant role today by their positive participation in PRIs, for many promising tomorrows in India and world at large.

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