

Original Article

Women Empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Case Study

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Abstract

Though many laws have been enacted not only at the national level but also at the international level, women could not occupy an equal role in the decision-making processes across the world. Even in the post 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India, the role of women in its democratic decision-making is not satisfactory. When we talk about the status of women in the Indian society, the most important aspect that comes to mind is patriarchy. This paper tries to look at the initiatives of the Government of India to improve the condition of women through the prism of Panchayati Raj Institutions. It also looks at the working of these institutions in the post 73rd Amendment, towards the empowerment of women by taking a case study of the Cachar district with special reference to Silchar and Lakhimpur development blocks. The paper focuses on the obstacles faced by women representatives in the Panchayats and highlights the factors which overtly or covertly tend to prevent women members from performing their roles.

Keywords: Empowerment, panchayat, constitution, women, participation.

Introduction

Women empowerment is an important aspect of human rights and development discourses. It is a necessary basic condition for the overall development of any society. Although women constitute nearly one half of the population, they continue to be subjugated, unequal in economic and political status. Women empowerment has been a continuous debate in India and elsewhere for decades. To Oxfam (1995), empowerment means being able to challenge the existing oppression and inequality in society.

Rowlands(1995) sees empowerment as a bottom-up process that cannot be formulated from the top only.

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To Rowlands, empowerment does not only mean to have access to decision-making powers but also to be able to and entitled to occupy the decision-making space. Batliwala (1994), defining it from a feminist perspective, states that women empowerment should result in (i) an understanding that both men and women are equal beings regardless of their gender, using their full potential can help construct a more humane society for all; and; that (ii) men should give up false value systems and ideologies of oppression in dealing with women.

Indian women occupying a subordinate position to men need to be empowered to overcome social, political and economic discrimination. There have been several attempts to improve the position of women since India got independence in 1947. The 73rd Amendment Act is a major step towards political empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj Institutions. This has resulted in the entry of a large number of women in decision-making bodies in rural areas, who were otherwise homemakers. The Human Development Report relates empowerment to participation. It says that since development is for the people, they must participate fully in the decisions and processes that affect their lives (UNDP, 1995).

Women empowerment has remained a goal for all governments in India since independence. According to the Eleventh Five Year Plan, it includes social empowerment, economic empowerment and gender justice. Social empowerment includes creating an environment through adopting various policies and programmes for the development of women, to provide them easy and equal access to all the basic services so as to enable them to realise their full potential. Economic empowerment includes ensuring provisions like training, employment and income generation activities with both 'forward' and 'backward' linkages with the ultimate objective of making all women economically independent and self-reliant. Gender justice includes elimination all forms of gender discrimination and thus enables women to enjoy not only de-jure but also de-facto rights and fundamental freedoms at par with men in all spheres,

viz. political, economic, social, civil, cultural, etc.¹

Gender equality and empowerment of women is recognized globally as a key element to achieve progress in all areas. In order to promote development of women, many countries along with various international associations have adopted a number of laws and conventions. In this regard, the UN adopted a convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women on 18th December 1979, which came into force on 3rd September 1981. In spite of such conventions and time-bound measurable goals, world statistics tell the deplorable condition of women. They are marginalized from enjoying the fruits and benefits of equality and independent status. In India, women at both socio-economic and political levels do not enjoy the same level of powers as the men. To meet these challenges, the Parliament has incorporated the Three Tier Panchayat Raj Institutions by the 73rd Amendment, 1993 in the Constitution whereby 33% seats have been reserved for women, but with a view to more representation, the UPA government approved the reservation of 50% seats for women starting from 2012.

It is in this context that the paper tries to look at the initiatives of the Government of India to improve the conditions of women through the prism of Panchayati Raj Institutions. It also looks at the working of Panchayati Raj Institutions towards the empowerment of women by taking a case study of the Cachar district with special reference to Silchar and Lakhipur development blocks. More particularly, the paper stresses on the obstacles faced by the women representatives in the Panchayats, to highlight the factors which overtly or covertly tend to promote or prevent women members from performing their roles.

The study is important and essential in order to overcome the insignificant quality and quantity of women's participation in the process of policy-making. The induction of democratic decentralization as a form of governance tried to increase the participation of subordinate groups, including women, in India in the late 20th century. The new wave of decentralization

in 1990's, through 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments gave 33.33% representation for women in local governments. This was seen as a road to political empowerment and gender equality. This gave opportunity for a large number of women to enter local governments and to be a part of the decision-making bodies. Thus, decentralization with affirmative action was accepted as a means towards gender equality and political empowerment. However, equality of opportunity cannot be achieved this way as there are obstacles in the social system i.e. a patriarchal society.

Women are being elected to local bodies in unprecedented numbers as a result of constitutional amendments that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments. In India, we call this new system as the Panchayati Raj Institution. The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in one village, or a larger area such as 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994, and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of the government and it needs time to mature the involvement of women in decision-making processes in rural politics. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. The percentages of women at various levels of political activity have shifted dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from 4-5 % before to 25-40 % after.

Though the number of women participating in panchayats has increased, the elected women are facing a number of problems starting from their decision to contest elections to performing their development duties. An evaluation on women's participation in various places reported that they were sometimes not informed or rarely invited to the meetings in panchayats headed by male members. In other cases, husbands accompanying the elected women select members to attend the meetings. Various studies on women's participation in panchayats have found that they agreed to contest elections either due to family pressure or the decision of their community and not because they were keen to do so. In short, the provision of

reservation coerced them to participate in decision-making process in local bodies.

Methodology

The present study was conducted in Cachar district of Assam state. Cachar district has 1 (one) Zilla Parishad 163 (one hundred sixty-three) blocks. Out of these 163 blocks, Silchar and Lakhipur development blocks have been selected purposively in order to assess the role performed by the elected women members of various governing bodies. Silchar development block has 42 revenue villages covering an area of 17,500 hectares and a population of 1,21,238.² Among them 26,311 (21.7%) belong to the Scheduled Castes and 1,002 (0.82%) belong to the Scheduled Tribes. Among them, 5 seats each are reserved for women for both AP (Anchalik Panchayat) and GP (Gaon Panchayat) respectively.

Lakhipur development block has 7 GPs and has been selected for the co-existence of subordinate groups like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the same area. It has 60 revenue villages in an area of 39,757 hectares. Lakhipur development block has a population of 62,926 according to the 2011 Census. It has 5,385 Scheduled Castes (8.56%) and 6,627 Scheduled Tribes (10.5%). Four seats each are reserved for women for both AP and GP respectively in Lakhipur development block.

All the women who had contested the latest local elections in both the development blocks were interviewed using an interview schedule in order to elicit objective responses like the reasons for contesting elections for the panchayats and demographic profile. The total number of women elected in AP and GP in both the development blocks was 18, along with 37 women ward members in Silchar development block and 30 women ward members in Lakhipur development block.

Analysis of Data and Findings

The total sample size of the study is 85 elected women representatives of the panchayats including AP, GP and ward members. As the primary objective of the study is to inquire into the reasons for contesting elections and the factors leading the women to go for elections to

panchayats, a brief study of demographic profile of the respondents like age, religion, caste, socio-economic background, educational status, and family structure is indispensable. The average age of the women representatives was 40-45 years. It indicates that they tend to enter the Panchayati Raj Institutions when they have become relatively free of family responsibilities regarding children.

The educational level of the respondents included 20% above High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC), 50% HSLC, 26% below HSLC but above V standard, only a few numbers had studied below V standard, and could only sign their names. No illiterate representatives were found among the respondents. Political experiences like involvement in social services or Non-Government Organisations by the women representatives also affect their working as public representatives.

The data collected after a detailed survey supports the view that women in the middle age group (40-45 years) possessing necessary educational qualifications sound strong in working as public representatives in rural areas. It is interesting to note that a

very less number of women Panchayat members were being paid honorarium for their work. They were, thus, working selflessly for overall general welfare and development of their people.

Reasons for Contesting Elections

Majority (23) of the respondents wished to help people in the society and work for the development of the concerned village. Ten respondents mentioned that they had been pressurised by the family, especially their husbands and fathers-in-law. Five respondents had entered the panchayats to hold power and to prove their identity, political parties had motivated five other respondents and another five mentioned that since there was no other women member to contest elections from the party, they had (Fig. 1). Panda (1997) observed that most of the women entered the Panchayat Raj Institutions due to persuasion by their family members and pressure from the village community, pressure from political parties and their personal interests.

Table 1

Reason for Contesting Elections

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Hold power	3%
Help people in society	15%
Pressure from family members	7%
Pressure from party	4%
Non-availability of women representative	1%

Source: Based on field work between 22nd January 2014 to 24th June, 2015 in Silchar and Lakhipur Development Blocks.

The result shows differently from the last decade. Ambedkar (2006) reported that women's entry into the political arena, particularly at the state level depended more on their support within the party than on support from the electorate. A majority of women contested elections to local bodies due to non-availability of women candidates in the area. However, the present study shows that 50% of the respondents were interested in helping the marginalized sections of their societies, including women living below the poverty line.

Meetings Attended by Elected Women Representatives in Panchayat

A majority of the respondents had complete freedom of expression in the meetings. They raised their points of view in the Panchayat meetings. They actively participated in the discussions and debates regarding future plans of action. They were free to determine areas required for development. Twelve respondents among the women ward members said that they weren't free to put forth their points of view. Gender disparity was found to be the major reasons for not entertaining their viewpoints as male member's view points were preferred in male-led panchayats. Another reason was that they felt hesitant to present their views in front of the male members dominating the meetings. Six respondents reported that it was difficult for women to attend the meetings, reason being odd topographical considerations and domestic constraints.

Palanithuri (2001) revealed that women members are facing a lot of problems in Panchayats and male members did not co-operate with elected women ward members. Reservation for women in such organizations alone will not help them to make decisions unless they themselves become assertive. In the present situation, the study finds that such non-cooperation is absent in local bodies except in rare cases, which is also not based on gender disparity.

Ways to Overcome Constraints

Elected Women Representatives need to adopt methods to overcome these social constraints. Their level of political awareness is relatively low in comparison to their male counterparts. An average number (5) of respondents reported that they motivated the Panchayat members to inculcate the interest for a positive approach in the overall interests of the area. Three respondents reported that they built confidence in themselves to face such situations and dispose of matters where their views differed, in a positive manner. Two respondents revealed that they regularly attended the meetings to keep themselves updated and an equal number of respondents opined that they did not participate directly. The responses have been summarised in the following table (Fig.2). Table 2

Awareness of the Elected Women Representatives of the Panchayats in Silchar and Lakhimpur Development Block

Heads	Elected Female Members			
	Ward Member	GP President	AP Member	Total
Know about three-tier system of Panchayats	22%	40%	46%	36%
Know about the name of their constituency	25%	65%	60%	50%
Know the name or number of their ward/GP/AP/ZP	30%	60%	69%	53%
Know about their development Block	60%	80%	78%	72.6%
Know about their Zilla Parishad Council	20%	55%	44%	39.6%
Know about the functioning of PRI	18%	30%	25%	24.3%
Know about women's reservation in Panchayats	64%	70%	75%	59.6%
Know about Women Empowerment	31%	45%	48%	41.3%

Source: Based on field work between 22nd January, 2014 to 24th June, 2015 in Silchar and Lakhimpur Development Blocks.

For ensuring active participation in any activity, one must have complete knowledge about the system of PRI and the nature of activities to be performed in their respective panchayat areas. Unless and until one is aware of her rights they cannot implement the same into action. Thus, for ensuring complete participation of women at the grassroots level of democracy, awareness of the women, relating to the objectives of the government for introducing 50 percent reservation for women in the panchayats, knowledge about the working of PRI and general political and economic awareness are necessary. The awareness of the rural women regarding the three-tier system of panchayats as found in the two development block areas of Silchar and Lakhimpur is shown in Fig. 2. The study found that the elected ward members had very less information regarding the structure and functioning of PRIs and even regarding their rights and empowerment than GP president and AP members. This variation in awareness among the representatives (viz., ward members, GP and AP) is due to the level of education among them, secondly, they are also politically illiterate and thus are not politically conscious; thirdly, they are dependent on either their husbands or male counterparts for the discharge of their functions and thus, find no need of gathering knowledge and have no queries either. In such a situation, the dream for women empowerment through enhancing women's participation in panchayats seems too far-fetched due to a complete lack of awareness among the elected women, the traditions in the male-dominating society as well as excessive dependence on family and male counterparts.

From the above discussion, it can be revealed that though active participation of women is yet to be achieved in grassroots democracy; their growing role in rural development cannot be ignored. Thus, in addition to performing their domestic activities, they are also contributing to the development of their areas and thereby the nation as a whole through participating in panchayats. However, it is to be noted that in order to bring all-round development and empowerment of women, women's consciousness of their own rights as well as the benefits meant for them, is necessary.

They must be politically more conscious to ensure their complete participation in rural politics.

Thus, in order to make women aware of their duties and roles in PRI, political education as well as ideas and values of globalization, liberalization, freedom, rights, etc. can play here a significant role. It has also been considered that the inclusion of well-qualified women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural areas would be an important instrumental measure for improving social status and empowering the underprivileged groups, including women. The representation of qualified women at the village Panchayat level can strongly support issues related to the betterment of women, and can play dominant roles in the decision-making process and make suitable recommendations for improving the status of women in the panchayat meetings too.

Concluding Remarks

In the Constitution of India, there are provisions for equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their social and economic status. However such provisions exist only on paper for millions of economically and socially weaker people of the country, especially the SC's, ST's and women. Women suffer in terms of sex ratio, literacy rate, disproportional work force participation, life expectancy and access to power structures which control and guide development programmes of our country. Since access to political opportunities and participation in political decision-making processes are important components of capability and autonomy, discrimination in this aspect leads to wastage of women's potential and efficiency which are necessary for an all-round development of the country. One of the three variables used in the construction of the Gender Empowerment Index is the relative share of women in administrative and managerial positions (UNDP 1995). Women need to be involved in the decision-making process at all levels in order to bring their demands to the national agenda. Various women's organisations and social activists had asked for a 50 percent reservation for women in all the grassroots level organisations, be they political, non-governmental or economic.

The role of women Panchayat members in the political decision-making process has been examined critically on the basis of data collected by interviewing the women of two development blocks of Cachar District. The study was conducted to know the extent of women's participation in decision-making in rural areas and how reservation can enhance their empowerment. The study shows that a significant number of elected women representatives attended Panchayat meetings regularly but only a few members expressed their views, the reasons for which relate to lack of proper knowledge of the subject matter on the issues arising in the meetings. Besides, the patriarchal set up of the society and the consequential non-cooperation by family members and male co-members posed a problem in their working as representatives. However, it is encouraging to observe that women representatives ignored the non-cooperative behaviour of their colleagues and increased their efforts to resolve the problems of the area. The data indicates a growing number of women panchayat members accelerate the efficiency of the Panchayats. A majority of the respondents revealed that financial assistance is necessary for their self-esteem and their independent functioning as public representatives.

In conclusion, it may be considered that to achieve the objectives set for women empowerment, advancement can be facilitated with the co-ordination of different sections of the society such as family members, religious heads, political leaders who should come forward and shun their interpersonal interests to understand and appreciate that women are an equally important segment of the society. Unless the patriarchal, male-dominated society is transformed and replaced by an equal, better socio-economic set-up where men and women are co-workers, the road to 'empowering women' appears to be tough.

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