

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, LEADERSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Panchayat Raj Institutions are regarded as the remedy for all rural development challenges and are associated with the empowerment of marginalized groups, particularly women. This study offers an overview by topic of the empowerment of women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions within the framework of the decentralization process and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in India, addressing Panchayat operations, self-determination capabilities, engagement in community activities, awareness of socio-economic changes, decision-making authority at the Panchayat level, and political participation. The participation of female MPs, notably those from marginalized groups, has significantly expanded in recent years mostly due to affirmative action. Numerous studies suggest that female leaders exhibit lower levels of corruption, deliver higher-quality public products at competitive costs, and prioritize women's concerns to enhance overall governance. Conversely, research has indicated that female representatives are often illiterate and reliant on their spouses and male authorities for decision-making, particularly in relation to rural development initiatives. The review indicates that women's political advancement is challenging in a patriarchal and caste-dominated society, resulting in numerous difficulties for female members of the Gram Panchayat. Female representatives experience discomfort in functioning at the Panchayat level due to the predominance of male representatives, and they require more time to demonstrate their competence compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, it was discovered that male representatives allocate more time to political activity, whilst females dedicate more time to domestic responsibilities. The 73rd Amendment's affirmative action has empowered women and underprivileged communities, however they have not yet achieved parity. Numerous scholars have noted that Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women are poised to advance in their social status, leadership positions, economic standing, educational attainment, and political consciousness and accomplishments during the coming decade.

Keywords:- Panchayati Raj, Women, Empowerment, Political Participation, Reservation, Leadership

Introduction

Women empowerment means giving women the freedom to take decisions in legal, political, mental, social, and economic areas on par with men. To develop such capacity in them that they can live their lives according to their wishes and self-confidence and self-respect are awakened in them. Women empowerment is a multi-dimensional and continuous process. Its objective is to establish a just and equal society because gender equality is said to be the key to good governance. Good governance cannot be successful until half of the population gets proper representation. In this direction, the Panchayati Raj system can play an effective and

meaningful role. Panchayati Raj has a special role in women's empowerment because through this, change has come at the social and institutional level and an attempt is being made to bring social empowerment through political empowerment. Many scholars call it the feminist revolution because its perspective is very broad. Without improving women's status, the world's welfare cannot be achieved because it is difficult for a bird to fly with one wing.

Swami Vivekananda Said For the progress of the country, we have to empower the women of India. "Once a woman takes a step, the family moves forward, the village moves forward and the nation moves towards development".

Panchayati Raj institutions are the first school of democracy. This is basically a system of governance based on decentralization. Central and state governance cannot succeed unless the democratic values at the lower level are strong. In the democratic political system, Panchayati Raj is the medium that brings governance to the doorstep of the common people. In this system, people try to solve their problems easily through the local system along with development work. Due to this, the public representatives associated with the Panchayati Raj institutions automatically get training at the local level for conducting development work. These local public representatives, in the course of time, provide strong leadership to the nation by representing the Legislative Assembly and Parliament. Thus, Panchayati Raj Institutions play a very important role in developing the nation.

Democracy facilitates empowerment, whereas Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) assure the involvement of all societal segments in the process. Enhanced gender equality is essential for the effective participation of women in any democracy. The central and state governments have instituted many programs to ensure equal opportunities for women in education, employment, and to enhance their economic position. Consequently, the position of women in India has experienced significant transformations over the past two decades. Upon the declaration of independence, Mahatma Gandhi stated: "Unless the women of India engage in public life, the nation cannot be salvaged." The aspiration for decentralization is unattainable. In my view, Swaraj is ineffective if it does not encompass the complete contribution of women. Gender inequality is a significant issue, and the Government of India, in partnership with various state governments, is implementing multiple intervention programs designed to really empower individuals. Women empowerment is the process of enhancing the economic, social, and political position of women in society, so affording them a decent existence. A primary strategy employed by advocates of women's empowerment is to enable women through Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) to facilitate their involvement in the political decision-making process. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment is significant for two main reasons. It promoted local empowerment and ensured the empowerment of women. It mandates the reservation of 33 percent (one-third) of Panchayat seats for women. The Act allocates reserved seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in accordance with their demographic proportions. One-third of the chairperson slots in Panchayats have been allocated for women. The current reservation quota for women at the PRI level is established at 50%.

Objective of the Study

The Objective is to Observe the Government Efforts made to Empower Women Through Panchayati Raj Institutions and Present Necessary Suggestions for Other Related Programs.

Methods to be use Compilation of Facts: -

The facts and figures have been mainly collected from secondary sources.

Important facts from various research books, magazines, etc. have also been taken.

Panchayati Raj is a form of Democratic Decentralization: -

Panchayati institutions are the basic foundation of democracy. True democracy is considered to be established only when democratic institutions are spread to the lower levels of the country and they get the freedom to run the administration of local matters. These institutions are the best schools of democracy and the best guarantee of democracy. Local institutions provide more security to democracy than other organs of the government. Panchayati Raj is a form of democratic decentralization, in which efforts are made to achieve pre-determined objectives by ensuring active participation of people. The main objectives of good governance include fulfilling public needs, solving public problems, rapid economic progress, continuity of social reforms, distributive justice and development of human resources etc. to make the system more and more capable. 1 The main objective of establishing Panchayati Raj is to bring about all-round development of rural life. Apart from this, strengthening the rural economy by proper management of increase in agricultural production, development of rural industries, family welfare programs, social forestry and tree plantation programs, animal protection, medical and health, education system etc. is also the fundamental objective of Panchayati Raj.

After attaining independence, liberal democracy was adopted in India. Indian democracy is completely based on the British parliamentary model, but some Indian values have also been included in it. The Panchayati Raj system that was developed in ancient times was less political and more social in nature. Gram Panchayats used to give direction to the entire life of the villages and Indian rural life was self-reliant. After independence, the constitution makers made a provision in the constitution to form panchayats in villages on the basis of the western democratic system.

A directive was included in the constitution that “the State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. The purpose of this article is to guide the states for the organization of village panchayats. The Supreme Court of India also advised the state to establish democracy at the level of local council and observed that the words “we the people of India” are not just a constitutional mantra, rather it means those people from the panchayat level to the upper level who are “the holders of the power of India”. Initially, these institutions played an active role in the social, economic, and cultural development of villages and towns, but with time these institutions became inactive. A time came when these institutions became almost dead. On one hand, elections to these institutions were not held for a long time and on the other hand, women and backward classes did not get adequate representation in power. The

main reason for this was the scattered laws in the states and the lack of control of the center over them. Under the constitution, there were no laws for the village panchayats. In spite of the directive principles of the formation of the Panchayat, these institutions were neglected, hence the need was felt to give them constitutional status. For this, the Panchayati Raj Bill was introduced in the form of the 64th Constitutional Amendment in 1989, but it could not be passed. Ultimately, the Panchayati Raj institutions were given constitutional status by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The objectives of the establishment of Panchayati Raj and a brief description of its development in the Indian context, along with the analysis of the role of Panchayati Raj, have an important place. The world today stands at the threshold of such changes, where it has to face a strategy of choices and challenges. The world today is facing both quantitative and qualitative changes. Quantitative changes are related to economic and technological development, while qualitative changes are related to the paradigm of a new society governed by different values and ethics, where a man plays the role of a 'protector and producer' instead of a 'predator', polluter and consumer. Under these circumstances, women are expected to play a special kind of role in the last phase of this century. The focus of studies and movements about women has now shifted from 'women's liberation' to giving 'rights to women' in the interest of humanity. Along with development and modernization, the concept of gender equality is being considered as the most important issue of social change. Emphasis is being laid not only on giving equal participation to women in economic development, but the need to consider them 'equal' on every front is also being felt. Along with this, the question of equal political participation of women as men is also the most popularly discussed topic of the modern civilization of the world.

India has designated 2001 as the Year of Women Empowerment to commemorate the new millennium. Gender equality and women's empowerment are seen as significant objectives (Goal 3) within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Additionally, the Government of India (GOI) initiated the UN Women Programme in 2011, with financial support from an external agency (UNDP), to enhance women's political leadership and gender governance in rural areas. The primary aim of this initiative is to fortify and augment equal political involvement of women in local Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The Global Gender Gap Report 2012 ranks India 105th out of 135 nations based on a composite rating that includes economic engagement, educational attainment, political empowerment, and health and survival. Reservation in local governance is beneficial. Efforts have been made to elevate women's status and address their challenges, although support from the male demographic has been insufficient. Women's empowerment continues to be a significant issue. The recently proposed allocation of one third or half of the seats for women in PRIs is inadequate for their empowerment. In many instances, women are homemakers and newcomers to the political arena. Their limited political engagement in rural local authorities is attributed to a narrow minded culture, a patriarchal society, and a low level of education.

Dalits have historically been ensnared in poverty and misery. They are victims of destitution, deprivation, and debt servitude. A socio-economically underdeveloped region such as Bihar is devoid of the essential dynamic attributes that facilitate, sustain, and expedite socio-economic progress. Elimination of all impediments is essential for empowerment. Dalits must receive

equitable distribution and access to social resources. While the development process has somewhat addressed the entrenched structure of inequality, empowerment must be cultivated to convert a condition of powerlessness and inaction into one of hope and proactive engagement. This can only be accomplished through the psychological mobilization necessary to dismantle the structure of inequality, injustice, and exploitation. It induces a profound transformation in an individual's personality, leading to a novel perspective on the current circumstances. Panchayati Raj possesses the capacity to establish a novel social order. It offers a foundation for grassroots initiatives. In numerous locations, it has served as a vehicle for freedom, education, and collective engagement, fostering critical thinking among underrepresented populations to influence their destiny.

Constitutional Provisions

The sources of assured entry of women in the political arena at the grassroots level are

1. Article 15 (3) of the Constitution of India which empowers the State to make special provisions for women. The constitutional mandate is a recognition of the fact that there is a need to empower women in India socially and economically so as to ensure their full participation in the social, economic and political activities of the country. 2. Under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, clause (3) of Article 243D of the Constitution ensures that not less than one-third of the total number of seats (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the provision to be fulfilled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the Panchayat. Then clause (4) of Article 243D of the Constitution states that the posts of Chairpersons in Panchayats at the village or any other level shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, women in the same manner as in the Legislature of a State. This provision can be made by law: Provided that the number of posts of Chairpersons reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Panchayats at each level in any State may be in approximately equal proportion to the total number of such offices in Panchayats. Provided that not less than one-third of the total number of posts of Chairpersons in Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution, April 1993, provided for reservation of one-third seats for women both on Panchayat members and their heads at various levels of Panchayat. Which brought balance in the social and political life of the country. Through this amendment, a new clause (9) and 16 articles were added to the Constitution. Article 243 (5) provides for membership of women and Article 243 (d) (4) provides for reservation of posts for them. Article 243 (d) provides that there will be reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes living in Panchayats at all levels. One-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women. The State may by law make reservations for the posts of Chairperson of Panchayats at the village and other levels and the State may reserve seats or posts in favour of backward classes of citizens in any Panchayat at any level. At present, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan and Kerala have increased the participation of women in Panchayat to 50%.

Role of Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions

Women have been the backbone of many Indian villages since the beginning. Mahatma Gandhi was always in support of Panchayat Raj and his dream came true with the 73rd Amendment Act, also known as the Panchayati Raj Act. This Act provides for one-third of the total seats to women including the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It reserved one-third of the total number of seats for women.

The Role of Women in Panchayat is as follows:-

- Participation in elections
- Participation in rural development
- Participation in decision-making
- Agent of Social Revolution
- Reducing corruption
- Reducing violence against Dalits
- The difficulties faced by women in representing Panchayat Raj institutions are-
- Political interference exists in Panchayats
- Women are made to act as proxies for men
- Husband takes the interference of elected women and acts on his behalf
- Lack of political awareness among women in rural areas
- The rights they have
- All negative public opinion
- Lack of education of women in rural areas
- Lack of training courses for women
- Reducing violence against women to prevent them from exercising their rights
- Practicing participatory democracy

Women Empowerment in Panchayat Raj Institution

Therefore, under the 73rd Amendment Act, women from scheduled castes and backward castes were made to vote in Gram Panchayats. One-third of the seats are reserved. People have to accept this reservation made for women voluntarily and respect the status of women in society which is not less than men. New policies should be made to further our victory of participation in activities with equality and mutual understanding between men and women.

- The initiatives taken for active participation of women in Panchayat Raj institution are-
- Steps have been taken to increase the participation of more women.
- All the elected leaders should have minimum literacy to follow the guidelines and educate the villagers about the PRI- Act.
- Literacy is a very big part of educating women about governance and increasing high participation of women in these areas.
- Develop leadership and communication skills in women to improve the journey.
- Train them to speak and find means to connect with local self-government to claim Panchayat rights.
- Educate women about the facilities and programs made for them by the state and central government.

- To empower and inspire them to achieve great things by breaking all cultural barriers.

Leadership and political participation of Scheduled Caste women in Panchayati Raj

The 73rd Amendment Act has proved to be a milestone in the direction of democratic decentralization. Through this process of decentralization, all sections of the society have a share in leadership. The present study is based on a detailed study of the leadership of Scheduled Caste women elected at the Gram Panchayat level. In the present study, the social status of the Scheduled Castes has been mentioned while explaining decentralization. In the same sequence, the historical scenario of women's participation in Panchayats has been presented.

The basic foundation of the Indian democratic system has been the Panchayat Raj system. Since the establishment of civilized society, when man learned to live in groups, the ideals and basic principles of Panchayati Raj have been developing in his consciousness. This system has been called by different names in different periods, sometimes it was called a republic, sometimes a city governance system and sometimes it was identified by some other name, but in all those systems, the tendency of living together, working together and solving one's immediate problems on one's own kept developing. Cooperation and self-reliance or self-reliance have been the basic mantras of these systems.

It is clear from the presented study that Mahatma Gandhi had dreamed of a strong Panchayati Raj system of governance in independent India in which the first unit of governance would be the Panchayats. He imagined that the Panchayats would be the pivot of the governance system as well as being self-sufficient, completely autonomous, and self-reliant. After independence, efforts were made from time to time to make this vision of Mahatma Gandhi a reality. Sometimes in the name of rural development and sometimes through community development schemes, Panchayats were used to strengthen the basic foundation of democracy. Different types of experiments were carried out in different states for this. Some were unsuccessful, some were successful and became exemplary for other states, but the establishment of Panchayati Raj at the basic level by decentralizing the administration in the entire country and the beginning of giving direct power to the people became possible through the 73rd Constitutional Act of the Constitution. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act provided constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj system in India. Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes and Women got representation in Panchayats through reservation.

The objective of Scheduled Caste Women Leadership in Panchayati Raj

1. To study the socio-economic background of Scheduled Caste women leadership which mainly includes information related to age, family size, education, economic status of family, occupation, marital status, etc.
2. To find out the perspective of women leadership in the context of implementation of Panchayati Raj system and information about the new Panchayati Raj system, election process of Panchayats, reservation system, rights and duties of Panchayat representatives, thinking of Panchayat representatives in the context of rural development, level of awareness of

representatives towards social justice and economic development, information about the working system of Panchayati Raj, obstacles in working, etc.

3. Evaluating political awareness and interest of Scheduled Caste women and party affiliation, political background, attitude towards local problems, action plan for the upliftment of backward and Dalit classes of the society, relation with administration, political ambition, will power of leadership of Scheduled Caste women etc.

S.S. Dhillon (1955) conducted a study related to leadership and class in South Indian villages. On the basis of his study, he clarified that three main elements are effective in the form of Indian rural leadership, first, high social status of the family, second, economic status of the family, third, individual personality traits. On the basis of his study related to rural life of North India, he told that the determination of rural leadership in India depends on factors like wealth, family prestige, age, personality traits, education, interaction and influence with the leadership, family effectiveness and lineage etc. In his study on the prominent leaders of Panchayat institutions and local leadership, he has clarified that a new type of political relationship has developed between the prominent leaders of Panchayat institutions and the higher level leadership, under which the Panchayat level leadership has proved useful as a vote bank for the higher level leadership, and thus a new politics of bargaining has come into practice.

The new Panchayati Raj system was started in India through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. In accordance with this system, the Panchayat Raj legislation was made in Madhya Pradesh and Panchayati Raj institutions were formed. Scheduled castes, tribes, backward classes and women have received representation in this system. With the aim of making Panchayats autonomous units of local self-governance, these institutions received rights, powers and duties. The socio-economic status of Scheduled Caste women leadership represents the real status of Scheduled Castes. Scheduled Caste women leadership has come to Panchayats due to less competition. Their talk of rural development and social reform can be considered encouraging. The answers of these leaders and Sarpanches of Scheduled Castes should be seen holistically. Such a leadership of women is emerging at the rural level. Scheduled caste women will be able to provide NDA and aware leadership in Panchayats.

Problems

From time to time, there is no proper coordination between government and non-government people on some issues. That is, disputes keep arising which affect work dependency in today's age of specialization.

- Corruption in the functioning of Panchayat institutions also adversely affects rural development work.
- Gram Panchayats lack proper administrative and financial rights. Due to which they are not able to play their important role in development work.
- The women who are getting elected have this mentality at their level that politics is the field of men, due to which a lot of hard work has to be done to make their place.

- The knowledge of the purpose of women representatives to enter politics or to get elected also affects all their political activities.

Suggestions-

Suggestions have special importance in any research. These are the mediums through which the way to solve the problems is found. These tell us what facts emerged during the entire research work and what further measures can be taken to resolve the problems in the future. Policies and programs can be made and implemented to resolve contemporary burning issues and problems through suggestions based on the research work. These suggestions can guide future research work and policies and programs. Further research work can be accelerated through suggestions. Based on the experiences and insights developed from the presented research, the researcher presents the following suggestions and recommendations:

- Before making women representatives candidates in Panchayat elections, their opinion should be sought, i.e. whether the women members want to contest the elections voluntarily and whether they will be able to discharge their duties with a sense of complete dedication after winning, this should be ensured.
- Elected women representatives should be well educated and trained regarding their duties, responsibilities and rights, in which only women representatives should participate, not their family members and guardians.
- Women should be informed about their duties etc. in practical ways.
- Illiterate and less educated women representatives should be given information about the post using audio-visual media. Men should encourage women representatives to perform their duties and responsibilities themselves. In this, they can take the help of family members but under no circumstances their responsibilities should be performed by their family or guardians.
- Government employees should provide assistance to women representatives by using simple and local colloquial language.
- The Panchayat should assess the participation of men in women leadership from time to time.
- Women representatives should be encouraged to work on their own and their work should be appreciated.
- Group discussions should be organized in the meetings organized at the Panchayat level so that people can share their experiences with each other regarding women leadership.
- The work of the Panchayat should be discussed by broadcasting bulletins at the Panchayat level. There should be a special discussion on the activities of women members.
- The cooperation of non-governmental organizations should also be taken in preparing and implementing schemes and programs in the Panchayat.
- Awareness should be spread in society regarding women's leadership so that women come forward and are determined to discharge their responsibilities and develop the courage to face the obstacles coming their way.

- Public awareness should be created about the efforts being made at the government level for universal education, in which girl education should be given priority so that along with the creation of a strong generation, the development of society and nation is possible. Trained social workers should be employed at every level of the Panchayat, especially at the block level.
- Social workers can provide support to women's leadership by becoming associates, guides, experts, and consultants among the people.
- Social workers can work by promoting the development programs of Panchayati Raj.
- Social workers can provide awareness to women public representatives about their responsibilities, duties and work.
- Social workers can help these service providers in providing services holistically.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study indicate that gender quotas significantly enhance women's political knowledge, as the majority of elected female representatives possess a strong understanding of political activities and panchayat functions. Following their acquisition of substantial information regarding political matters, these women exhibit increased engagement in political work. It seems that, in conjunction with political education, women's interest in politics has also escalated, which is crucial for political empowerment; in this regard, reservation has significantly influenced empowerment. The reservation system has positively influenced women's self-confidence, which is a significant indicator for both politics and the broader empowerment of women. This approach has provided women a platform to engage with social and political institutions, resulting in increased visibility and enhanced confidence to fulfill their responsibilities for the improvement of their communities. The women's reservation system has facilitated women's advocacy on topics including prohibition, dowry disputes, divorce, and the trafficking of girls. However, there are certain domains where reservations appear to have been largely ineffective. The current study indicates that women have a strong interest in learning participatory tactics; nonetheless, a significant gap remains regarding their involvement in the decision-making process. The study indicates that reservations have not enhanced political trust in political parties, despite these women having confidence in the political system. Discussions with female representatives reveal that the obligation for political parties to designate a woman owing to reservations has engendered distrust towards the party. A like outcome is seen in the realm of political interactions, where the data indicates the presence of gender quotas. This approach appears to have a negligible effect on women's political connections. The primary contribution of this study is the proposal of an alternative dimension to assess the influence of reservation on empowerment by introducing a novel category previously overlooked by researchers: the initiation of new public projects by female representatives. The study data indicates that these female representatives have attempted to initiate public projects alongside the standard operations of the panchayats, although require governmental cooperation to secure

additional funding. Concerning gender role attitudes in politics, female representatives expressed that they see unequal treatment compared to their male counterparts. These ladies asserted that men disregarded them and that they were never informed of this neglect.

Upon inquiry regarding the variables that promote women's participation in politics, female members indicated that reservations for women are the primary motivator and facilitator for their engagement in political life. Furthermore, these women. They stated that their motivation to enter politics stemmed from family members and others. These ladies frequently necessitate their husbands' assistance in distributing the laborious duties of the household.

In short it can be said that the Indian government is trying to empower women through various economic socio political policies and programmes but still some shortcomings remain to be addressed. The result of the present study shows that reservation for women in panchayats motivates them to come forward in political field.

It can be said that reservation for women can be an important impetus for women empowerment in India at the rural level but it is not a guarantee of elected women participation. The goal of women's empowerment will not be met by reservation alone, and the respondents have identified a number of barriers. There is a need to change many aspects of existing gender relations, and power distribution and make tough decisions relating to power-sharing. Although it cannot be claimed that women are clearly empowered despite these reservations, it cannot be denied that they have gained some degree of authority and self-confidence as a direct result of quotas. In this regard, it appears that quotas can be a viable tool for the political empowerment of women.

Through these suggestions given to strengthen the Panchayati Raj system and to obtain constructive positive cooperation and participation of women and to create their political, social, economic life sphere, the basic idea of Panchayati Raj and the reality of decentralization can be achieved in reality. Thus, the provision related to one-third reservation for political participation of women does proper justice to them along with entrusting them with responsibility. Therefore, if the suggestions given through the proposed research to make women's participation active in politics are properly followed in a certain direction, then it is believed that positive results will emerge in the direction of political empowerment of women.

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