
A Study of Issues and Challenges in Empowerment of Women Through Their Participation in the Panchayat Raj Institution:

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It involves the building up of a society wherein in women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. One major therapy prescribed by woman empowerment advocates is empowering women through legislation for ensuring participation in political decision making. Such an approach provides the women with a constitutional platform to stand up to men, to raise their voice on issues concerning women oppression, subjugation and related issues and thus in effect, providing them with an identity in an orthodox male dominated socio-political set up, in addition to providing a much needed forum to seek redressed of problems directly affecting them: the true essence of empowerment.

Key Words : *Empowerment, Women and Panchayat Raj Institution.*

The present paper attempts to look into the dynamism of the process whereby women empowerment is achieved through legislation or women participation in the Panchayat Raj Institution. The study is based on primary evidence collected from Women Pradhans in various blocks of Allahabad District (as per 2005 elections) and attempts to political participation of women translate into concrete women empowerment : a state where women are able to carve a niche for themselves in the traditional male bastion and successfully find a forum for effective redressed of women\ gender related issues or whether increased political participation of women (more than 50%, as in case of Allahabad District), is but an eyewash, an essential dexterous jugglery of numbers with no female empowerment ramifications whatsoever.

The study largely reveals that increased political participation of women in village panchayats does not have a significant bearing on women empowerment for by and large elected women representatives lack audible forums and fail in seeking redressed to women specific issues even as they are primarily (mostly), dummy surrogates subservient to the still vociferously dominant male class. Of late there has been an increasing consciousness regarding the status of women which is amply reflected in global debates over the issue of women empowerment: the unequivocal nucleus for all forums seeking to lift the traditional veil and impart a more meaningful existence to woman: the inseparable companion, the ever caring mother, the doting wife, who has since times immemorial been relegated to the background. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of economic, social and political status of women, the

traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Kofi Annan takes violence against women as the most shameful of human rights violation. To him, " violence against women takes various forms such as : domestic violence, rape, trafficking in women , forced prostitution and violence in armed conflict Empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives "

Gender inequalities in economic life also become a causal factor in the chronic poverty of all household members, not just of women, in poor households and the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. Norms about child marriage of girls, gender biases against girls education, women's limited mobility, women's lack of control over fertility decisions, gender gaps in wages and employment, all contribute to difficulties of escaping poverty intergenerationally through vicious cycles between poverty and gender inequalities.

Placing greater emphasis upon gender discrimination, Human Development Report (1997) prepared by the UNDP maintains that the degree of gender discrimination does in fact have a significantly negative bearing upon the extent of human poverty. The report goes on to calculate the gender development index (GDI) based upon (a) female life expectancy (b) female adult literacy and gross enrolment ratio and (c) female per capita income. The report argued that across countries there are systematic relationships between gender inequality, as measured by the GDI and the general level of human poverty as measured by the Human Poverty Index (HPI). " Gender inequality is strongly associated with human poverty. The four countries ranking lowest in the GDI — Sierra Leone, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali — also rank lowest in the human poverty index (HPI). Similarly of the four developing countries ranking highest in the HPI, three — Costa Rica, Singapore and Trinidad and Tobago — also rank among the highest in the GDI " (UNDP 1997, page 39) the report also finds that HPI is correlated to Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) , an index that measures the extent of gender inequality in political and economic participation and decision-making.

The three countries with the worst GEM ranks — Mauritania (94) , Togo (93) , and Pakistan (92) — also have very high HPI values : 47% for Mauritania and Pakistan and 39% for Togo. But among the countries with higher GEM rankings — such as Trinidad and Tobago (17) , Cuba (23) and Costa Rica (26) — are some of those with lowest HPI values. For Trinidad and Tobago the HPI is 4%, for Cuba 5% and for Costa Rica 7% . Thus in these six countries there is a strong association between the extent of human poverty and opportunities for women delivering the keynote address at the regional conference on development effectiveness through gender mainstreaming strongly observed " The costs of gender inequality are far too high to ignore. By not addressing gender inequality we are regenerating poverty. The fact is, for poverty reduction promoting the empowerment of women is critical. This recognition of the crucial link between gender discrimination and poverty thus lent further credence to the belief that discrimination against women was an undesirable evil which therefore called for radically strong ameliorative measures.

Broadly there may be two ways for bringing about gender equality and women empowerment through inducting women in the mainstream of development and assuring their access to productive assets and (b) through legislation for ensuring them equal social and political status and assuring their participation in political decision-making and thus providing them a platform for venting their grievances , integrating their issues into the mainstream of the decision-making

process and fighting for the cause of female community in general and of the poor and oppressed women in the society in particular. However in both the strategies providing education is the crucial link which holds the key.

The best way of empowerment is perhaps through inducting women in the mainstream of development. Women empowerment will be real and effective only when they are endowed income and property so that they may stand on their feet and build up their identity in the society. Development warrants the eradication of the feeling of dominance and dependance of whosoever is associated with inferior economic status. Economic empowerment can be a handy tool in as much as enabling a woman to lead a graceful existence in her family and society but may not prove too potent a weapon in the larger more grim battle against social, political and even economic oppression, which warrants collective strength. In a democratic setup collective strength emanates from political participation.

It requires some legislative compulsions for mending the working of political and social institutions, which if left to them are unlikely to change in favor of women. It thus calls for, essentially, an active participation of women in the decision-making process. Empowerment of women through legislation then provides the women with a constitutional platform to stand up to men, to raise their voice on issues concerning women oppression, subjugation and related issues and thus in effect, providing them with an identity in an orthodox male dominated sociopolitical setup, in addition to providing a much needed forum to seek redressed of problems directly affecting them: the true essence of empowerment. In a decentralized federal structure, with growing emphasis on the implementation of various employment and income generating schemes, participation of women in the decision making process at the Panchayat Raj institution level becomes imperative if they are to seek any meaningfully significant gains for themselves.

This paper attempts to analyze the effectiveness of legislative weapon for empowerment of women and highlight the issues and challenges there in. It tries to analyze the effectiveness of women's participation in the political process, largely to be judged on the basis of their political awareness, their capability of decision making in a male dominated society, their consciousness about various issues concerned with women viz. providing education to girls, health, nutrition, fighting against dowry, oppression, rape, molestation etc. It looks into the dynamism of the process whereby women empowerment is achieved (?) through legislation or women participation in the Panchayat Raj institution and seeks to analyze whether political participation of women does in fact translate into concrete women empowerment : a state where women are able to carve a niche for themselves in the traditional male bastion and successfully find a forum for effective redressed of women /gender related issues or whether increased political participation of women (more than 50 %, as in case of Allahabad district) , is but an eyewash , an essential dexterous jugglery of numbers with no female empowerment ramifications whatsoever.

(1) Gram panchayat consisting of a village or a group of villages having a population of not less than 5000 and not more than 7000 or the geographical distance of an area within a radius of five kilometers from the centre.

(2) Block (Taluk) panchayat for every block.

(3) zilla panchayat for every district.

With the 73rd Amendment the reservation system has been put into practice. It provides for one third of total Constituencies to be reserved for women. Because of the adoption of the policy of rotation, reserved constituencies' election which implies that a constituency which is a reserve constituency this year may very well be a general constituency in the next term. The elected representatives continue to hold office for a period of five years.

With the introduction of reservation or quota system in the Panchayat Raj institutions a great beginning has been made in the direction of legislative empowerment of women and it is hoped that along with women's empowerment through collective voicing and participation in the development stream, it should go a long way in the real empowerment of women. But the critical question is as to how far this step has been really effective in involving women in the decision making process and raising the issues related with women community and getting them integrated with the mainstream of decision making? Has it really worked in solving the basic issues and problems faced by women in the society? The present study is mainly concerned with the analysis of these issues.

The primary objectives of the study are

- (1) To examine the fact as to whether inadequate representation and participation of women in the Panchayat Raj institution is one of the major factors that has contributed to the low status of women in the rural areas.
- (2) To examine as to how far the participation of women has been successful in integrating the issues concerned with the women community in the mainstream of decision making.
- (3) To substantiate the existence of disparity and disadvantages faced by women in their participation in the Panchayat Raj institutions
- (4) To identify the causes and obstacles that infringes the participation of women in the Panchayat Raj institutions.
- (5) To examine the complementarity of the legislative measures and developmental measures in raising the status of women.
- (6) To examine as to how far the participation of women in the political process has made a dent in the grim issues and challenges before women.

Case 1

The first panchayat we surveyed is in the Handia block of Allahabad district. The total population is around 5000, there are 390 houses and 470 families. The gram panchayat (GP) is divided into 6 wards and has seven members. Three positions are reserved for SC's and one for ST. Out of the seven, 4 are women. The post of the gram pradhan was reserved for SC woman; consequently Ahilya Devi was elected as the Pradhan.

Her father-in-law, an active member of a political party, was the gram pradhan in the earlier term and still accompanies her to the meetings of the gram panchayat and though she does preside over the meetings of the GP she is unable to voice her opinion on issues and her opinion is not even asked for as all the policy decisions are taken by the male members of the GP which is effectively controlled by her father-in-law. She reiterates that she never felt the need to take any

major decisions for whatever is done by the male members of the GP is in the best interests of the village community since they have much more experience and ultimately it is the male members who run from pillar to post in order to get the funds released, to hold parleys with the district officials when some bottleneck crops up : tasks she cannot effectively accomplish as she is a woman.

When we questioned her as to whether she would contest the next elections even if the seat was unreserved, she responded that there would be no need for her to do so for then ‘ Babu ’, (her father-in-law) would be contesting the elections anyway.

Case 2

Another gram panchayat we surveyed is also located in Handia block which is around 25 kilometers from Allahabad and has a population of around 4500 people. There are 460 houses and about 530 families. The GP is divided into seven wards and has a eight members. 2 seats are reserved for SC,1 for ST, and 1 for OBC. Out of eight members, four are women. The gram pradhan is a SC woman, Kasturi Bai. Here we found it very difficult to break the ice initially but after subsequent assurances with regards to the confidentiality of the responses the surveyors did manage to elicit some responses and the revelations were startling.

The gram pradhan was not willing to contest for even the post of a member let alone president but was effectively goaded into doing so at the behest of a local powerful political clan — in whose household her husband and his forefathers had traditionally been employed as menial servants.

Though she categorically denies being a puppet in the hands of the local politician , as she points out she does preside over the meetings of the GP but she does accept the fact that she has not been able to use the GP fund for doing some substantial work for the upliftment of women in her area as most of the funds are traditionally earmarked for the village development projects and even though she would personally wish that special schemes were initiated to promote the cause of local women, she does not have much say in this regard. Citing her illiteracy and lack of income generating assets as major impediments, she opines that perhaps her voice would have been more audible and authoritative had she been hailing from a more literate and more economically sound background. Being the gram pradhan has not done much in terms of improving her status: either financially or socially.

Case 3

This gram panchayat we surveyed is located in a very interior region of the Handia block, with a population of about 4900 people mostly belonging to the SC and OBC categories. There are about 470 houses and 510 families. The GP President here, Dhanpatia, belongs to the OBC category. When we questioned her we found that she could not name even a single scheme which was being run for the alleviation of poverty in her area, even though the schemes were supposedly operational. She accepted that becoming the GP President had not done much in terms of raising her social status for the social setup was such that her role was confined to the GP meetings and apart from that she did not have much social interaction with members of the village community. She reluctantly revealed that she was not all that comfortable mixing up with the male members of the GP, moreso since it was not looked upon with favour by members of her household. Her election campaign too did not involve direct contacts with the male

members of the village community but it was her husband and other male members of the household who garnered support for her.

Case 4

The gram panchayat we surveyed next is located in Shankargarh block of the Allahabad district. It has a population of around 5200 people and is located around 35 kilometers from Allahabad city. It has roughly 500 houses and 530 families. The GP President Ram rati Devi hails from the SC. When the surveyors interviewed her they found that she was not aware of the rights and responsibilities that came along with being the GP President apart from attending the meetings of the GP.

Main findings of the survey

- (i) Nearly all the SC gram pradhans and about 85% of the other women gram pradhans are illiterate with very poor understanding and knowledge of the gram panchayat manuals, their rights and responsibilities, poverty alleviation and employment generating schemes which are currently operational in the rural areas . They are even unaware of the major sources of revenue of the gram panchayats.
- (ii) Almost all the SC women gram pradhans and nearly 30% of those hailing from other backward classes (OBC), are dummy gram pradhans in the sense that either they avoid participating in the meetings of the Gram Sabha altogether or simply sit through the meetings of the GP without any active participation in the deliberations whatsoever.
- (iii) Only those women gram pradhans who belong to the general category and a very small percentage from the backward classes actively participate in the meetings of the gram sabha and are involved in the decision making process.
- (iv) Most of the women pradhans who were sympathetic and conscious towards the problems, plights and issues faced by the village women community were nonetheless pathetically indifferent towards raising the issues in the meetings of the gram panchayat.
- (v) Political participation of women in the local rural bodies has hardly made any noticeable dent in terms of raising their social and economic status, improving the literacy ratio, providing health, maternity and sanitation benefits to women and ameliorating violence, oppression, menace of dowry, rape, discrimination etc.
- (vi) Political consciousness in general and awareness regarding women's status and related issues in particular are more marked in the developed blocks of Handia as compared to Shankargarh block (which is primarily a backward block)

Concluding Observations

The adoption of legislative approach to women empowerment through the reservation of seats in Panchayat Raj institutions and that too at a time when the government has shown a keen commitment to implement various employment and poverty eradication schemes at the very grassroots levels and increasing the role of local self governments in the implementation of plans, is definitely a desirable and welcome move and should ideally prove to be effective.

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