

Women, Grass-Roots Democracy and Constitutional Measures

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The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has created an exclusive political space for women in grassroots level institutions with a vision to enhance their representation in nation building process as effective leadership of women is important for bringing them into the mainstream of development. This Amendment has raised expectations of the society that these women would play an effective role in the Panchayati Raj institutions. They face multiple hurdles in the process of governance and socio economic development under the patriarchal culture. This paper aims at describing constitutional measures taken by the Government of India since independence to involve women in grassroots democracy and assessing its significance. It attempts to analyse the impact of these measures on the actual performance of women in Panchayat Raj institutions and reasons for their low level of participation. Furthermore, this paper contains suggestions as to how to bring more women into the fold of grassroots democratic institutions.

In the era of globalization, liberalization, democratic decentralization and women empowerment, participation of women at all level is a pre requisite for the process of nation building. Women need to play an effective role in the decision making bodies and development programmes as in a democratic system, every body has a right to participate in shaping the society. Modern democracy provides equal opportunity to all without any discrimination in respect of caste, colour and sex. Indian Constitution guarantees political equality through adult franchise. Article 14 of the Indian Constitution provides for equality. Article 15 prohibits any discrimination on the grounds of religion, caste, sex etc. But it further clarifies that this provision will not prevent the state from making any special provisions for women and children. This has been done because women are considered as weaker section of the society. Politics for centuries has been considered a male prerogative because women were perceived as weak, passive and lacking in resistance. They were supposed to be incapable of using public power and for ages, they were deprived of citizenship role because they were considered to be lacking in right sort of reasoning. In India the impact of western liberal democratic thought and reassessment of India's ancient scriptures by its liberal minded intelligentsia led to redefinition of women's role in the family from that of total medieval subjection to a kind of limited partnership, through a movement described as modern Indian renaissance. The great social reformer gave added impetus to the women's awakening. They condemned social evils and supposed religious sanctions behind these customs by reinterpreting the original religious texts. During freedom movement, a transformation in attitude towards women was precipitated with the advent of Gandhi on the Indian political scene. His non-

WOMEN, GRASS-ROOTS DEMOCRACY AND CONSTITUTIONAL MEASURES

violent Satyagraha against the might of the British Empire strategically involved the masses including women in protest and non-cooperation movement. Gandhi viewed woman as man's equal.

Panchayats have been in India since the ancient times. But their creation as formal bodies has been traced to the colonial period. But there was no place for women. The Panchayati Raj System is a new innovation of Independent India. The idea of greater autonomy to grass root bodies was advocated by Mahatma Gandhi before the Constituent Assembly and the Nation. Gandhi knew that India lived in villages. If India is to make progress, her villages must be revived. The Indian Constitution envisages it in the Directive Principles of State Policy wherein Article 40 lays down 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 as units of self government." Jawahar Lal Nehru got Community Development Movement launched on October 2, 1952. He envisaged Panchayati Raj as an institution of democratic decentralisation and means to the end of the community development.

Balwantrai Mehta Committee and Women in Panchayats in Post 1959 India

The role of women in making a success of grassroots democracy has been emphasized by all national level committees appointed to review and recommend measures to strengthen the Panchayati Raj System. The Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) in order to make women contributors to development and be not just beneficiaries, not only recommended assistance to women to increase their incomes and improve the conditions of their children but also co-option of women members to Panchayati Raj institutions to give them representation in the rural political institutions. However, it needs to be said that the committee thought of women's participation mainly from welfare perspective and not so much from a power-sharing one.

The Santhanam Committee on Panchayati Raj Elections (1965) in its recommendations for representation for special groups stated that though women can not be called a weaker section by any test of poverty or of social status, yet owing to traditional subjection and exclusion from public life, women, even those belonging to more prosperous sections of the community, have been kept out of it. They, therefore, recommended that "the association of women at every level of Panchayati Raj is necessary for its growth. Their active association will break the tradition of exclusion and bring about a keen political consciousness among people as a whole."¹ Even while recommending a minimum representation of two women members in a village panchayat, four in Samiti and eight in a Parishad, the Committee's perception of women's participation in public life was limited to the welfare syndrome and did not encompass their contribution to the total development of the rural area.

A few States came forward and passed Panchayati Raj Acts. Rajasthan was the first State to introduce Panchayati Raj System. There were variations in the pattern of Panchayati Raj organizational structure and constitutional framework of different states. The State Governments made the provision of co-option of one or two women in case no woman was elected. But the provision of co-option of women in Panchayati Raj System was severely criticized as it was undemocratic. It destroyed the sense of innovation among women to contest election or they were incapable of contesting election (Kaushik 1993). The motive behind the cooption for representation of backward sections of society or of women has also assumed political devices to strengthen the position of pradhan or of dominating

groups. "In practice, the co-option or nomination had meant sheer patronage of the dominant political or social group and the women who got nominated had practically no information on Panchayats nor any experience in working for women and children, they were not expected to either. The women's representation became one of the tokenism and proxy and ended as near total failure."²

Most of the studies conducted revealed that women were passive, usually shy and "Yes men" of sarpanch. They did not go to attend the meetings. They did not raise any issue and initiate any resolution concerning women's welfare. They were less interested in the welfare of the village and political institutions. Co-option had not helped women to be vocal. They were the silent spectators of the whole issues (Bhargava 1979; Jain 1976; Bhatnagar 1974 and Jacob 1967). "This legal privilege for females, operates within limits set by the male – oriented and male-dominated social structure. It was pointed out that free mixing between men and women was restricted, and it was especially disapproved in case of young unmarried daughters, and daughters-in-law, so are women unsuited to the normal duties of a panchayat member viz., supervising, contacting, canvassing, initiating, debating etc."³

Thus the provision of cooption did not make any significant impact on women's political space. To understand the ground reality, the complexity of social system has to be taken into consideration. Panchayati Raj operates in complex social environment where class, caste and gender hierarchies have crucial bearing on the institutional processes and democratic governance. "Politics is said to be a domain of male sex. In the rural areas when a woman enters into politics, she is taken as an exception".⁴ Patriarchal culture, illiteracy, poverty and lack of awareness about their rights and duties were the main causes responsible for negligible role of women panches.

Asoka Mehta Committee

Nearly a decade later the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI). 'Towards Equality' (1974) recorded with concern that notwithstanding the equalitarian provisions enshrined in the Indian Constitution and considerable experience of women's participation in the national movement and elite politics, their representation on representative bodies was woefully inadequate. The CSWI was constrained to observe that "the resolution in social and political status of women, for which constitutional equality was to be only the instrument, still remains a very distant objective".⁵

In the general conclusions on the political status of women in the decade of the seventies the CSWI perceptively commented "though women do not numerically constitute a minority, they are beginning to acquire the features of a minority community by the three recognized dimensions of inequality: inequality of class (economic situation), status (social position) and political power."⁶ Since participation in a democratic polity is fundamentally a question of the exercise of rights as a citizen and acquisition and exercise of power the CSWI also examined women's participation at the grassroots level of Indian democracy that is the Panchayats at the village level. It noted that the representation of women through statutory provisions of co-option or nomination at the local level had become more of a 'tokenism'. More often than not, it was the wives of big land owners and politically influential persons who managed to get co-opted/nominated. Even though the committee in its argumentation on the reservation of seats for women in Legislative bodies i.e. Parliament and State Legislatures did not accept the suggestion for reservation but pointed towards an important

WOMEN, GRASS-ROOTS DEMOCRACY AND CONSTITUTIONAL MEASURES

aspect as follows: “We find that in order to provide greater opportunities to women to actively participate in the decision-making process, it is imperative to recognise the true nature of the social inequalities and disabilities that hamper them”.⁷ It, therefore, not only strongly recommended the special opportunities for women for participation in the representative structure of local government but also the establishment of statutory Women’s Panchayats at the village level with autonomy and resources of their own. These bodies were not meant to be parallel organizations to the Gram Panchayats but were to form an integral part of the Panchayati Raj structure. This was to be a transitional measure to counteract the general apathy and indifference of the local bodies to women’s development and change of status and also to break through the attitudes that inhibit most women from articulating their problems and participating actively in the existing local bodies. An exclusively women’s body, the committee felt, would provide opportunity to more women to gain experience and confidence in managing their own affairs. The existence of such statutory bodies would help to ensure better co-ordination of various Government services and programmes for women at the level of implementation.⁸

The Report of the Asoka Mehta Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions (1978) highlighted the role of women representative in decision-making on development projects and their involvement as an integral part of the total development of the village community. The Committee also took note of the suggestion made by the CSWI for statutory women’s Panchayats and observed that this proposal “emanates from the postulate that their contribution to the rural economy has not been adequately appreciated and if appreciated has not been institutionalized”, and their representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions is mainly ‘token’ and not effective in articulating women’s needs or for mobilizing their adequate participation. These two aspects of voice in decision-making and participation in the elective process are in a way related”.⁹ Greater representation of women in the Panchayati Raj Bodies is likely to influence both the directional and implementational level, the committee added.¹⁰

The Asoka Mehta Committee while recommending reservations of two seats for women and their participation in the elections, referred to the Punjab Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads Act, 1961 wherein the provision existed that two women securing the highest number of votes amongst the women candidates in the election, take the seats reserved for them. This method of cooption by election was supported by the committee. It further suggested that these seats would be in addition to the general seats which they may win by a majority in the normal course and thus they could possibly get more seats than reserved. This thinking was quite laudable but like other good resolutions about women, nothing much came out of it except tokenism.

Another important recommendation of this committee was an institutional arrangement through a committee with all women members of the Mandal panchayat represented on it to ensure that decisions were made by women themselves on priorities and choices in welfare and development programmes specially for women and children. In the process of modernization of agriculture, in commercialization of activities allied to agriculture, in ascending mobility of labour, often the special difficulties of women were lost sight of, and as a result they become losers through development, the Committee added. Such Committees, the Report further recommended, should have powers of the Panchayat with earmarked funds.¹¹

Farsighted and laudable as the Asoka Mehta Committee Report was, it somehow, still failed to visualise the impact of its meager recommendations about women would have on their participation in the political process and their share in power at the grassroots. The National Perspective Plan for women (NPPW) (1988-2000), a decade later notes this deficiency. The NPPW affirmed that co-option was done “only in letter and not in the spirit of getting the women involved in panchayat activities.” It further states “The participation of women in Panchayats as it is today hardly gives any scope for women members to participate effectively and independently in democratic and political processes or to influence decision making.”¹² The States of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh had taken the lead in reserving 25 per cent and 30 per cent seats respectively for women in the Panchayats. Enhanced representation, it is felt, is likely to remove the isolation of women and give them visibility and strength to be more assertive and to take part in decision making.¹³

A study of Karnataka revealed (Bhargava and Subha 1999) that women had made entry into political arena, which was till then left untouched to a great extent. Earlier only one or two women members were co-opted or nominated into Panchayati Raj bodies. Almost half of the population was given a chance to participate in the decision making process and development programmes to determine the needs and priorities. It was also evident from the study of Andhra Pradesh that women had started participating in the decision making bodies in the Gram Sabha, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad (Manikyamba 1989).

Scenario after 73rd Amendment

It is the Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act, which seems to have provided some real basis for bringing women into the power structure at the base i.e. the Panchayat level. While reserving one-third seats for the Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes in the Panchayat area, one-third of such seats shall be specifically reserved for women belonging to SC/ST sections, provides the Act as per Article 243D(2) Article 243D(3) provides that not less than one-third (including the women’s SC/ST seats) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. Further, the Act provides for reservation of SC/ST and women, in the offices of Chairpersons of the Panchayats at the village or any other level. The intentions of the Act are thus clear. Power has to devolve to the people at the grassroots, and specific provisions have been made for those sections which have suffered through centuries of stark exploitation by being kept out of power and depriving them of education, property and power i.e. the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. The Act enables thousands of SC/ST women candidates to take power in their own hands and use it for the betterment of their condition.

Most of the studies conducted after the passing of 73rd Amendment Act revealed that with the provision of 33 per cent reservation clause, the number of women in Panchayati Raj bodies has significantly increased. But the dominance of men persists because of patriarchal culture, traditional outlook and low percentage of literacy among women. The women members of Zila parishad and Block Samiti are playing more effective and efficient role than the women representatives of Gram Panchayats. Mostly women members of Zila parishad and Block Samiti belong to political families.

WOMEN, GRASS-ROOTS DEMOCRACY AND CONSTITUTIONAL MEASURES

They have better understanding of the issues involved in the functioning of Panchayati Raj. (Purohit, Chaturvedi and Lodha 2002). On the contrary majority of the women members of Gram Panchayat had no formal schooling, were usually shy and have less interest in the welfare of the villages. Many of them who become members for the first time are accompanied by the male members of the family who perform their duties. In case of woman Sarpanch, it is usually her husband or son who takes decision and performs her role. When elected women representatives meet officials with men of their family, the officials meet the latter and not the former. Even reserved seats are offered to their husbands and other male members of their family (Palanithurai 2004). The objective of reserving seats will be lost if this problem is not checked immediately.

Further men create hurdles where woman sarpanch is working and join hands to get a vote of no confidence passed against her (Baviskar 2005). The male members have been dominating the functioning of Panchayats and do not allow women to participate effectively (Palanithurai 2002). Thus reservation clause which intends to empower women in Panchayati Raj Institutions is being made ineffective by traditional power leaders in rural areas as they get vote of no confidence passed against women and dalit panches. (Lele 2001). A study of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Madhya Pradesh reveals that still the dominance of men persists. In fact, they are the chief spokesmen where their wives are sarpanch. The main reason for this non-performing role of women is illiteracy and parda system (Misra 1996).

In Rajasthan, too, because of traditional outlook and feudal values, the participation of majority of women at grassroots level is not encouraging yet some women have shown capabilities in their work. The performance of members of Panchayat Samiti is fairly better (Purohit, Chaturvedi and Lodha 2002). The performance of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Andhra Pradesh is not uniform. They are having poor educational background (Sarumathy 2002). Initially, women were hesitant to enter the political arena, political parties took advantage of this situation and proxy rule prevailed. A new class of sarpanch pati also emerged where the husband of the women serpanch managed the affairs of the panchayat, while women acted only as a rubber stamp. (Mathew 2003).

Some of the women representatives feel that male members help them in the functioning of the Panchayati Raj bodies because they are totally ignorant of their role and illiteracy becomes an obstacle in their functioning. Hence, there is need to train these women Panchayati Raj functionaries about their rights and duties and their role in Panchayati Raj institutions otherwise new entrants will not be able to play an effective role (Palanithurai 2002). Besides training them, there is need to bring attitudinal changes in the society as patriarchal culture is still dominating rural society. They consider women's place is at home only and that they are not fit to perform public roles (Baviskar 2005).

Conclusion

A large number of women in Panchayati Raj institution will lead to the formation of a new power structure in rural areas. New power structures will definitely play a role in the transformation of rural society which may not be assertive initially but with the socialization process and awareness, women representatives will play a role in the rural society and become instruments for better implementation of government schemes. It would ensure greater participation of people. Women will take more interest in the programmes of household needs, water, primary and higher education, health centres natural

resources management and will work for sustainable development. They would gain confidence in times to come in the functioning of Panchayati Raj institutions and with the training programmes and education, they would develop new ideas and techniques.

But it is suggested that thorough attitudinal change has to come about before women can really take their due place in public life because the greatest obstacle is the perceived dichotomy between public/private gender domain of men and women and cultural inhibitions fostered through exclusion in public roles in spite of being engaged in productive roles inside and outside the homes. World over women and girl child have been loaded with household work, care of children, fetching of certain necessities of life like water and fuel etc. The women movement propagates men sharing at least some household chores with women. Then alone women would be free and would have time to play their citizenship role effectively. A great stress should be laid on education for women's equality so as to prepare them to play multi-faceted role in a society which is increasingly becoming more and more scientifically and industrially oriented in its basic socio-economic structure and cultural ethos. Education is bound to raise the social and political awareness of women and make them more capable of participatory democracy. Lastly, it is essential to recognize women's productive roles at village level. Invisibility in this sector has obstructed training through agricultural extension and upgradation of productive skills in craft work, industry and village level industrialization both in farming and non farming sectors. Women's self earning and economic strength will be a big booster not only in raising their status in society but also in bringing about empowerment.

Notes

1. Report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj Elections, 1965, Ministry of Community Development and Cooperation, Government of India, New Delhi, 34-35.
2. Kaushik, Susheela. 1993. *Women and Panchayati Raj*, New Delhi : Har-Anand Publications, 15.
3. Jacob, George. 1967. *Readings on Panchayati Raj*, National Institute of Community Development, Hyderabad, 12.
4. Bhargava, B.S. 1979. *Grass Roots Leadership*. New Delhi : Ashish Publishing House, 54.
5. 'Towards Equality', *Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*, 1974. Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi, 301.
6. *Ibid.*301.
7. *Ibid.*304.
8. *Ibid.*304-305.
9. *Report of the Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions*, 1978. Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, Government of India, New Delhi, 141.
10. *Ibid.*141.
11. *Ibid.*141,180-181.
12. *National Perspective Plan for Women*, 1988. Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, New Delhi, 156.
13. *Ibid.*157.

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WOMEN, GRASS-ROOTS DEMOCRACY AND CONSTITUTIONAL MEASURES

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