

The Issues and Challenges to Women Leadership at Grassroots Level Democracy in India -An Evaluation

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Abstract

The 73rd Amendment stipulated that women hold at least one-third of the seats in panchayats. India has the most women in elected seats, with 1.4 million. In the 26-year journey to ensure real women's political representation at the grass-roots level of democracy, Panchayati Raj Institutions have seen both remarkable success and staggering failure. It has failed to provide better governance under the leadership of women representatives across India due to several constraints. This article provides a thematic assessment of the issues and challenges faced by women representatives in PRIs, with a focus on women's leadership and the 73rd constitutional amendment in India. its emphasis on panchayat functioning, capacity to make self-decisions, participation in community activities, changes in their socio-economic circumstances, decision-making power and political participation at grassroots level democracy. There are numerous barriers that prevent women from successfully participating in panchayats from a variety of aspects. Moreover, while this increase in female voter turnout in elections, particularly in Gram panchayats, can be attributed to a larger degree of female representation, actual female empowerment and gender equality in local governments remain a major worry in reality. An ingrained patriarchal system, the predominance of bureaucracy villagers' lack of awareness of panchayat functioning, inadequate leadership, and politicisation of Panchayat institutions are among the reasons limiting women's effective participation and leadership.

Keywords: *PRIs, Women leadership, 73rd CAA, Women Leadership, Democratic Decentralisation, Grassroots level Democracy.*

Introduction

Authorities under the Panchayati Raj have been crucial in changing the socioeconomic conditions in rural India. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act mandates 33.3% reservation in PRIs across India for women and marginalised populations. Yet, as we commemorate the passage of this amendment on the National Panchayati Raj Day, 24 April, the tangible and transformative contribution of grassroots women leaders remains side-lined, in favour of stories around failure and co-option. The tale of a guy in Uttar Pradesh violating his celibacy vow to force his wife to run in the Panchayat election went viral on April 1 of this year. The 1992 amendment proved to be a game-changer, ushering in more than 14.5 lakh women into positions of leadership in local government throughout India. As many as 20 states have raised the percentage of reservations for women in their PRIs to 50% today, including Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim. More over 50% of women are represented in PRIs in many states, including Karnataka, a sign that women are now winning in wards that weren't previously earmarked for them. Politics and governance, once seen as the domain of men, are now undergoing grassroots transformation. With a number of success stories of women in leadership roles as prime ministers, cabinet members, and chief ministers, India has been a leader in various aspects of women's political participation. In the Covid-19 era, women leaders in PRIs have realised their potential as self-sufficient achievers, breaking into a field from which they have traditionally been barred. Women's political engagement is still sexist, nevertheless. Rural infrastructure and financial administration remain the purview of men, despite the fact that health and education are seen as appropriate fields for women. It is difficult for freshly elected women representatives to understand what is expected of them as elected members due to a lack of information and administrative expertise, which frequently results in situations where male representatives assume authority. Nevertheless, despite this, they don't seem to be a significant factor in these bodies' decision-making processes, mostly because to their lack of political exposure and male politicians' meddling. Another characteristic is that more and more women are casting ballots, and in the most districts, women voters outnumbered men in the most recent Panchayat election. However, the road ahead is not that easy for the newly elected woman legislator. In actuality, a multitude of barriers, coming from many angles, prevent women from effectively participating in the panchayat. However, this rise in the number of women voting in elections, particularly in Gram Panchayats, may be attributed to a higher level of female representation, albeit in practise, true female empowerment and gender equality in local governments remain major issues. **The following are some of the major challenges are as follows:**

Challenge of Financial Difficultiesties

The main issue is a lack of funding for PRIs. Local governments have two options for funding: either they can rely on intergovernmental transfers or local taxes to do so. It goes hand in hand with the government's lack of interest in delegating the fund functions and bureaucrats. It will not be enough to simply reserve seats for women to mainstream women in politics and erase the historical wrong done to them. Half-hearted and piecemeal approaches won't work if the

state is truly serious about the devolution of authority to the panchayats and execution of the true spirit of the reservation for the disadvantaged part, especially the women. Since the state is preparing all 29 subjects for the panchayats, EWRs who currently lack the essential abilities must be given the resources, people, and other resources they require. Even for matters covered by PRIs, the state legislature must expressly approve the right to impose taxes. Even though financial commissions at all levels have pushed for more devolution of finances, governments have not taken many steps to do so. PRIs frequently struggle to address even the most fundamental local governance issues since they are hesitant to engage in initiatives that require any significant financial investment.

The presence of patriarchal socio-cultural practices

these have now made it difficult for people to participate in meetings. Women are not permitted to take part in public gatherings and conversations when an elderly male villager is present. It is viewed as disrespectful to the male members of separate villages when women attend Palli Sabha sessions in the village and Gram Sabha meetings in the Panchayat headquarters. On the other side, some former Kharmunda Panchayat Samiti members have expressed interest in attending the conference. It sheds light on how much women want to be involved in the growth process. The family, village, and societal barriers at various levels, however, discourage and prohibit this activity. She was eager to participate despite these obstacles, but the rotating nature of seat reservations precluded her from doing so. In truth, the rotational basis for women's seat reservations greatly aids in giving women more chances; yet, a woman who is interested in running for the same seat is prohibited from taking part in Panchayat Raj Institutions.

Women who serve as Gram Pradhans as proxy Women

who were once thought to be weak and defenceless are now empowered. They will, however, need some time to adjust to the system and deal with their new status. Men and other officials are perhaps more prone to abuse or misuse their power at this time. The majority of the job is done by the male family members, hence female pradhans are more likely to be influenced by them to run for office and afterwards. Although it appears that the women won the election, the male members are actually in power. While the female members continued with their domestic duties, the male members handled the situation and responded to people's questions. The involvement of the husbands and other male relatives who accompany the women delegates to the panchayat office and other meeting and training locations, which are typically far from their homes and which they are unable to travel alone, was noted. The majority of them claimed that their attendance was contingent upon the presence and availability of these male members.

The predominance of Male Representatives

Due to male representatives predominate, women members find it difficult to work at the panchayat level and it takes them longer to establish their qualifications than it does for male representatives. Additionally, it was discovered that male representatives spend more time engaging in political activities than female representatives do family tasks. Overall, even

though they have not yet reached equilibrium, affirmative action through the 73rd amendment has empowered women and the marginalised communities. According to several experts, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women will undoubtedly advance in the next ten years or so in terms of their social standing, leadership roles, economic standing, educational attainment, and political awareness and attainment.

Lack of active participation in the debate and gram sabha meetings

The EWR hardly ever took an active part in the discussion during these meetings. This is especially true for Muslim women and, to a lesser extent, members of the SC and ST communities. It was discovered that 42 respondents merely sat and listened as 8 others took part in the conversation that others started, but none of them started the conversation themselves during the meeting; instead, some of them were prodded by the male escorts, and the latter occasionally spoke on their behalf. The study found numerous factors that contributed to the low levels of participation in panchayat and gram sabha meetings and decision-making. Despite laws aimed at strengthening women by reserving half of the seats, it is noteworthy that the gramme panchayat meetings in Kadwa, Katihar, are primarily male-dominated affairs. The EWR's attendance was found to be extremely low. It was discovered that, despite not being organised, many panchayat and gram sabha sessions were mere formalities noted solely in the records. It was discovered that many of the meetings were called without giving the gramme sabha any advance notice. Meetings via proxy were held. In his research in Orissa, Patnaik (2005) also discovered male domination, a lack of female delegates, proxy gram sabha meetings, etc.

The intervention of local MPs and MLAs into the domain of Panchayats

Due to their worries about losing control when authority is transferred to the institutions of the Panchayati Raj, legislators, ministers, and bureaucrats have felt frightened. Due to their inexperience, lack of understanding, and other shortcomings, higher political personalities have been observed to turn antagonistic toward lower political figures. They would use the occasion to criticise how the Panchayati Raj operates. Additionally, the careers of local-level politicians are expected to advance, which poses a challenge to the MLAs and MPs. Hence the conflict between the decentralisation process and the local politicians.

Existence of Pervasive Caste Discrimination in Panchayats

Despite progressive legislation and constitutional protections, little has been done to cleanse society of this evil. This study makes the case that traditional and religious taboos still have a stronghold over the majority of India, subject many members of the Dalit community to social duties and economic hardship, and are supported by polls done in four different Indian states. Palanithurai (1994) claims that the candidates were afraid that the women from upper caste and wealthy parts would oppose the reserved category of women and would not welcome the rise in the number of women representatives from disadvantaged in Tamil Nadu. The four communities he chose to research have around thirty different forms of unjustifiable discrimination against Dalits. He claimed that neither the gram panchayat office nor the gram Sabhas could be managed or controlled by Dalit women panchayat leaders. As agents, their

husbands were in charge of the office. Women have been marginalised in the district of Agra, Uttar Pradesh, as a result of several issues, including poverty, illiteracy, proxy candidates, low status for women in society and families, etc.

Lack of leadership abilities

Their inability to exert themselves or even to speak openly about their thoughts is a result of their lack of leadership abilities. According to recent research, 77% of women working in Panchayati Raj Institutions feel that it is difficult to affect change on the ground. Since the state is preparing to devolve all 29 subjects to the panchayats, EWRs that currently lack the appropriate resources, manpower, or expertise must be given those before complete authority and subjects are transferred to the panchayats. It must give panchayats all the necessary funds, resources, and staff, as well as help them develop their capacities through training programmes for women representatives that are specifically tailored to Muslim, SC, and ST EWR needs as well as those that are culturally sensitive in general; enhancing remote areas' mobility with infrastructure; eradicating poverty, and dismantling society's patriarchal worldview.

Existence of the Sarpanch Pati System

Even after being elected, their spouses still handle the majority of the work in the panchayats. There is a discrepancy between policies that empower women by keeping half the seats open and complementary policies, practices, and rhetoric. To give women a level playing field and secure their involvement in the political process, the government should assess the level of participation of elected women representatives. Despite being elected to panchayat offices, women have not participated in the development process because of a variety of causes.

The Predominance of the Bureaucracy

The apathy of the bureaucracy has made it difficult for the SC and ST women's representatives to function as authentic democratic institutions with public engagement. Public interest became a causal relationship between poorly governing officials, non-governing officials, and non-officials since the bureaucracy did not give up its elitist attitude to become more rural-oriented. The administration is hostile toward the rural Panchayat head. The character of popular democracy is weakening as a result of the bureaucracy's control over PRIs.

Conclusion

In order to build panchayats' capacities, it is necessary to provide them with all the necessary resources, funds, functions, and functionaries. This includes providing Muslim, SC, and ST EWR women representatives with training that is specifically tailored to their cultural needs, as well as infrastructure in rural areas that will improve their mobility and help reduce poverty. In order to make the elected women representatives successful leaders at the grassroots level of democracy, they need be given a sufficient support system and education. However, it should be avoided for local MLAs and MPs to get involved in panchayat representatives' sphere of influence. It must also look into options for paying ward members, particularly the under privileged section, compensation. The Members of Panchayats should also receive training, which calls for knowledge and materials from various subject-specific training institutions. It

can be accomplished by tying together organisations that deal with a variety of issues, including general management, disaster management, rural development, and financial management.

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