

DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN – A CASE STUDY OF INDIA

Rachana Kaushal ^a

^a Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

^a Corresponding author: kaushalrachna@rediffmail.com

© Ontario International Development Agency. ISSN 1923-6654 (print)
ISSN 1923-6662 (online). Available at <http://www.ssrn.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html>

Abstract: Women constitute half of the population. In any democratic process, the marginalized participation of women reflects negatively. Yet women are politically marginalized world over. Whatever may be the reasons for this, there is a need to make special provisions to include women in the democratic governance at different levels. India has taken the initiative to make a special provision for the reservation for women at the grassroots local self-government institutions (known as PRIs). How this policy has fared is the subject of this paper. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part covers the theoretical aspects of the 73rd Amendment Act and the second part discusses the impact of this amendment act on the status of women, their role in governance and the consequent socio-economic, political empowerment.

Keywords: Constitutional, Governance, empowerment, women

Constitutionally, Indian federal structure provides three tier democratic institutions namely, national/central level, provincial/state level and local/ grassroots level. Local/grassroot institutions in rural areas are known as the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) are provided for under Article 40 of the Indian Constitution and the state governments are entrusted with the responsibility to establish them by democratic i.e., election procedure.

But over a period of time these grassroots institutions were not very effectively working to bring about changes in the rural India. There were several reasons. Firstly, the constitutional provisions dealing with the PRIs are not mandatory in nature as they come under the state directives, therefore, not getting due preference from the states. Secondly, the states have paid scant regard to the moral obligation entrusted by the constitution responsible for the irregular or interrupted existence of the PRIs. The two reasons are mutually linked. Apart from the above cited

reasons, the PRIs also suffer from lack of financial autonomy, functional autonomy, lack of financial resources and also inadequate representation of weaker sections of the society etc.

Quite many efforts had been made to revive the defunct local self bodies such as PRIs by the central government. Several committees had been set up to review and explore the issues concerning the PRIs with a view to make suggestions for the effective functioning of these local self governing bodies. Way back in 1957, Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was formed which made several recommendations for better community development through community participation on democratic lines. One of the highlights of this committee report was the recommendation of **greater representation of the rural women in the PRIs**. Again in 1977, another committee headed by Ashok Mehta also laid special emphasis on the **need to recognize and strengthen womens' constructive decision making role in the PRIs**.

Thus, the significance of greater representation of women in the decision making for the purpose of community development was felt for a long time. However, this was given a concrete shape only in 1992 by amending the Constitution to effect the revival and reshaping of PRIs.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act brought about this change concerning the PRIs. The focus of this amendment was to not only revive the defunct PRIs but also to provide them with required resources, representation and autonomy to ensure their healthy growth.

One of the main highlights of this Act was the provision of 33% reservation for womens' representation at the PRI level which was quite a landmark achievement aimed at ensuring the greater participation and empowerment of the women in the democratic functioning of local self governing institutions. This remarkable provision was aimed to involve

women both as the beneficiaries and the decision makers in the community development at the grass-root level.

The most talked about issue relating to the above constitutional amendment was the provision for 33% reservation to the women at PRI level. There was a lot of opposition and criticism on this issue because critics argued that women are not experienced enough in politics and they will be only “dummy political leaders”. Some people argued that it will encourage in the creation of new categories of reservation which is discriminatory in democracy. Despite lot of resistance against this policy change the amendment offered an opportunity to put women at the helm of affairs in the PRIs. It is highly desirable to assess the impact of this change (33% reservation for women) on the empowerment of women.

IMPACT OF THE 73RD CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ON WOMENS EMPOWERMENT

The 33% Women’s representation in the PRIs includes membership and office holding at the apex levels. One big impact that is self-evident is the increased presence of women in the local self governing bodies at all the levels. This quantitative change in the increased participation of women is acknowledged in the official documents of the Government of India.¹

However, this quantitative leap of increased women’s participation is not for the real. Because many of these women act as proxy to their menfolk. There are other handicaps as well like illiteracy, poverty, lack of resources, socio-cultural factors like patriarchy and caste system under the feudal and patriarchal Indian social setup, lack of political experience and of course the growing negative role of political parties and the ever increasing role of money and muscle power in grassroots politics.

Poverty and illiteracy² together are responsible for womens’ dependence on men folk. Due to illiteracy women are not equipped to actively play their role in the PRIs and they have to depend on their male family members, even though some of them wish to act independently. Keeping this problem in mind both at the government and at the level of non-government organizations several training programmes are organized from time to time for women to discharge their

political responsibilities at the PRIs, so that they can effectively play their role. But there are instance where women are discouraged or even stopped from attending these training programmes/workshops by their family man who are perhaps not yet ready to accept women as Independent decision makers at the community level.³ Women too are not in a position to resist the patriarchal opposition because of their socio-economic dependence on their male counterparts.

Another important factor responsible for the inequity in the feudal social setup in India is the prevailing caste system. The Indian political system has been largely dominated by the upper castes at all the levels. The caste dynamics is more at play in rural areas compared to the metros or urban areas. Urban and metro areas are some what influenced by cosmopolitanism while the rural side is still deep seated in caste politics. With regard to the participation of women in the PRIs it has been noted that before 73rd Constitutional Amendment the women representatives elected to PRIs were largely from the upper caste.⁴ However as a result of womens’ reservation policy under 73rd Constitutional amendment Act the number of women from the lower and backward castes has increased. Though, there are instances of non-acceptance or resistance against the lower caste (dalit) sarpanchas, from the upper caste [1].

One more factor responsible for the discouragement of women to actively participate in local politics is the patriarchal notions about the family honours which prevent the younger and unmarried women (who ironically are more capable to discharge their duties as women representatives at the PRIs – as they have more energy and time being free from domestic responsibilities as well as better educated than the older women) from contesting elections [2],[3]. Related to this problem are some other political practices which further restrain womens’ participation in local politics. Growing tendency towards the role of ‘muscle’ and ‘money’ power in the election process is threatening too the womens’ participation in politics [4].

Theoretically speaking the elections to the PRIs should be conducted strictly on apolitical ground, meaning thereby that political parties should keep away from these elections. However the ground reality is just reverse. As political parties are overtly and covertly keenly interested in these elections [5]. Therefore, the PRIs elections are often marred by

1 As per Press release of Ministry of Panchayat Raj (2009) there are about 12 lakh elected women representatives in PRIs.

2 **Poverty** : 75.6% of Indias’ population is living below US\$ 2 (<http://southasia.oneworld.net> 15 May 2010). **Literacy** : As per 2001 census in India literacy figures for males is 75.83% while for females it is only 54.6% and for rural women just 46.70%.

3 . (i) Studies conducted by ‘Nirantar’ – A centre of Womens’ education;
(ii) ‘Empowerment and Sustainable Development Initiative in Western U.P.’

4 . ISS Studies of PRI elections in Karnataka (1987-90) revealed the fact that 60% of elected women members were from dominant caste.

party politics which again goes against women's participation. The attitude of the political parties is biased against the women, they do not encourage common women to contest the elections.⁵ Their choice of candidates is dictated by class, caste and gender bias and adding to it nepotism is also at play in the selection of candidates at party level. The compulsion of 33% reservation for women somehow tried to dilute the impact of these biases.

Considering the above mentioned constraints and restraints on the women's participation at the PRIs, the policy of granting 33% reservation to women has come under scrutiny. Various studies have shown that women have performed dismally. They are acting as the mere rubber stamps or their role is used by 'Pradhanpatis' and they are just figure heads. They are accused of lack of interest, lack of competence and lack of awareness. Thereby, they are not an asset for the community development. They are not the harbingers of community change which they were supposed to.⁶

In spite of all the criticism concerning women's goal in the PRIs particularly in the post 73rd Amendment period there are quite many success stories pointing to the political empowerment of women as well as their constructive role for the community development. It has resulted in the increased participation of women in the political life at the grassroot level, growing political awareness among the women, enhancement in the self esteem and prestige of women, better political orientation of the women [6]. Their growing involvement in the community development works leading to the better management of community development.

There are several examples of successful women panchayat chiefs who have contributed to the development of their areas and have become the role models. For instance Miss Nishika Sabitri who head a panchayat in a remote tribal area of Orissa has taken initiatives to augment the income of a panchayat by leasing out the ponds and mango orchards. She also ensured the basic needs of the rural people such as bathing and toilet facilities to be hygienically provided. She also took care that the other social welfare schemes such as poverty eradication schemes, widows pension old age pension, lost cost housing public distribution system etc. are efficiently managed

and people are getting benefited by these schemes. Another such example is of Meena Rani Bahera, a SC women who took up the cudgels against the corrupt practices plaguing the panchayats in the distribution of money for low cost houses and stood up against the office bearers [7].

There are many more examples of strong leadership by women in other states as well. In Karnataka women have proved their leadership qualities if given required support in terms of training and resources [8]; in Andhra Pradesh women in PRIs resulted in the development of social identities and political awareness [9]. There is another study exploring the impact of 73rd Amendment Act on women's leadership in PRIs in Punjab that found that reservation has made significant difference both qualitatively as well as quantitatively. The study highlights the fact that if constraints (like domestic responsibilities, caste and gender biases etc.) are overcome, women can prove leadership qualities [10]. Recently members of Norwegian Embassy Delegation interacted with the elected women representatives of PRIs in Rajasthan (Jaipur and Tonk district) and observed that women had developed the abilities to articulate the priorities of their respective areas and were influencing the decision making process effectively [11].

To conclude, it can be observed that the impact of the policy of reservation for women at the PRIs has been a mixed one. Majority of women are first timers and constrained by centuries old factors. So one can't expect miracle overnight. Moreover there are many other factors other than women's own deficiencies for dismal performance like corruption and unresponsive bureaucracy. Women despite working against the current have shown the way, their success on general seats show their acceptance by the masses. The experience shows that women are capable of providing leadership to the people if they are given time, support, resources, training and freedom from man.

REFERENCES

5. Womens' presence in Parliament is 8.9% in 2001 though an improvement from 4% in 1952 but not very significant. (www.gasats-international.dog.)
6. There are number of articles dealing with women and PRIs in different states in the book edited by Surat Singh "Decentralised Governance in India - Myth and Reality", Deep & Deep Publications, 2004. They indicate towards this fact; (2) Anil Dutta Mishra "Gender Perspective - Participation, Empowerment and Development", Radha Publications, New Delhi, 1999.

- [1] Prabhjot Kaur Kahlon, "The Impact of 73rd Amendment on Womens' Political Empowerment : A Study of Punjab" in Surat Singh ed. "Decentralised Governance in India - Myth and Reality", New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publication Pvt. Ltd., 2004, p.174.
- [2] E.K. Shanta, "Political Participation of Women in Pacnahayti Raj", New Delhi: ISS, 1999 in Surat Singh ed. "Decentralised Governance in India - Myth and Reality", New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publication Pvt. Ltd., 2004, p.163.
- [3] Gopal Singh, "Social and Political Background of Women Leadership in Panchayatraj Institutions of Haryana" New Delhi: Anamika Publishers & Distributors, 2002 in Surat Singh ed. "Decentralised Go-

vernance in India - Myth and Reality”, New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publication Pvt. Ltd., 2004, p. 164.

[4] “Auctioning of several GP seats”, *The Hindu*, 30.4.2010.

[5] S. Rajendra & Nagesh Prabhu, “Politics creeps into gram panchayat elections”, *The Hindu*, 24.4.2010.

[6] Esther Kar (2010, May 05) “Transform Rural India through Panchayat Raj”, Jansamchar.net (online newspaper) Available on www.dalit.eu/india-dalit-women-in-panchayat=raj

[7] Bidyut Mohanty, “The daughters of the 73rd amendment”, <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/india/bidyut73rd.pdf>

[8] H.M. Hemalatha, “A Hand That Cradles Can Handle The Panchayat”, *Kuruuskehtra*, March 2003. Also available on <http://www.csopartners.org.in/newsletter0210>

[9] B. Devi Prasad and S. Harnath, “Participation of women and dalits in gram panahcyat”, *Journal of Rural Development*, vol. 23(3), 2004. Also available on <http://www.csopartners.org.in/newsletter0210>

[10] D.P. Singh, “Impact of 63rd amendment act on women’s leadership in the Punjab”, *International Journal of Rural Studies (IJRS)*, vol.15, No. 1, April 2008.

[11] “Women empowerment impresses Norwegian delegation”, *The Hindu*, May 3, 2010.

About the author:

Author is Assistant Professor (Human Rights) in the Deptt. of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India; kaushalrachna@rediffmail.com