

## Women and Panchayati Raj

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***Decision making processes in Panchayats need to be better defined, to diminish the possibility of elite capture, proxy participation and single point decision***

**I**TIS argued that women need to be 'empowered' in the realm of political decision making so as to facilitate their 'real' empowerment.

About one million women entered Panchayats after 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional Amendment Act. It is a known fact that 40 percent of the elected women represented the marginalized sections and about 70 percent women representatives were illiterate and most of them had no previous political experience. Therefore, it was but natural that there was a widespread apprehension that women will be manipulated by men. However, in spite of several instances of such manipulation and capitulation by women, the presence of such a large number of women in Panchayats has indeed had a deep impact on gender equity. The occupation of the marginalized women of elected seats and chairperson's posts in grassroots democratic governments is a huge social and political revolution, the significance of which would take at least a generation to fully unfold.

There are a huge number of Panchayats working in different circumstances, the extent of empowerment of women vary from region to region and Panchayats work under different legal frameworks – as States have the discretion to define the scope and ambit of Panchayati Raj – every spectrum of political behaviour, ranging from abject subordination of women to remarkable instances of social and political assertiveness can be seen in the functioning of Panchayats. Therefore, examples are merely anecdotes – true only in respect of the instance quoted - and have very little value in terms of deriving conclusions about Panchayati Raj. Surely, an endeavour to broad base democracy on this scale is bound to have shortcomings and setbacks, and would need course correction. However, there is no taking away from the fact that there have been huge benefits, which have not been fully understood or studied, to empowerment and development through Panchayati Raj.

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The constitution prescribes only a minimum level of reservation of one third for women in Panchayats but the States have the leeway to mandate more than that level. Bihar took the bold step of reserving 50 percent of the Panchayat seats for women. Currently, elected women representatives are in place in 54 percent of seats in Bihar's panchayats. Bihar's example was followed by Sikkim, which increased their reservations for women to 40 percent and held their elections under the new arrangement in January 2008. Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand have passed laws increasing the reservations for women in Panchayats to 50 percent. These changes will apply to the next elections to Panchayats in these States.

### The Survey Report

A recent survey, commissioned by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and executed by the Nielsen Company-ORG Marg under the

guidance of an academic advisory committee, provides many new insights into Social and Political empowerment of women in the new Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This is the largest-ever survey on any aspect of Panchayat functioning, covering Gram Panchayats in 23 states, with a total sample size of over 20,000, including Elected Women Representatives (EWRs), Elected Male Representatives (EMRs), ex-EWRs, official functionaries and members of the community. Nearly three-fourths of the EWRs in the sample belonged to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and OBC categories, and were evenly divided above and below the poverty line. (See Table I&II)

Reservation has played a significant role as four-fifths of all the representatives got elected from reserved seats. The role of reservation was also evident from the fact that it emerged as an important motivator (43 percent) for contesting the first election as

much as its withdrawal was an important reason for not contesting the election among former women representatives (39 percent).

The majority of the elected representatives had contested only one election (87 percent) and hence the proportion of first timers in politics was also high (86 percent). Around 14 percent were re-elected more than once at the gram Panchayat level. Further analysis showed that the majority of ex-women representatives could not get re-elected because the seat from where they were elected was de-reserved in the next round.

While no gender discrimination in the Panchayat is reported by 60 percent of elected women representatives, acceptability in Panchayat meetings and enabling them to raise issues freely was mentioned by 94 percent. A supportive professional environment evidently motivates elected women representatives to perform better, as 60-64 percent reported an

**Table I: Comparison of change experienced by SC & ST and all women representative\***

Empowering changes after election	% SC/ST	% All EWRs	Notes on EWR data from Report
Internal reason for poor participation –proxy status, fear, low self confidence, knowledge, compliance to traditional caste and gender roles	72	22.9	Table 4.8, pg 56
Greater self-confidence	55	78	Table 7.1, pg 131
Increased leadership skills	31	69.8	
Family share responsibility for looking after children	39.8	62.4	
More role allowed in family decision making	39.8	68-75	
More respected after the election	58.4	79	
		65	
Able to speak up in their households and Gram Sabha more freely	34.3	67.9	
Greater self-esteem exhibited by SC/ST representatives	32.5	77.1	
Officials accepted invitation to visit panchayat	39.3	43.1	
Officials supported in implementing schemes	36.8	40.8	
Officials took prompt action on women requests/complaints	34.2	40.8	

\*Data on SC/ST women representatives from Mangubhai et al. 2009, on All EWRs from the EWR Report (MoPR 2009)

**Table II: Comparative involvement of women SC/ST representatives and all EWRs**

Aspects of Involvement	% SC/ST women*	% All EWRs**	Notes on EWR data from Report
President/Sarpanch/Pradhan			
Able to work/ discharge the official responsibilities with freedom and independence	Only one third of total 119 presidents surveyed		
Attended Panchayat meeting during their term	52.4		
Called Panchayat meeting	35.3	86	Pg 75, refer to Gram Sabha
		93.6	Pg 108, refer to standing committee meeting
Chaired Panchayat meeting	31.9	93.6	As above
Voluntarily signed resolutions	27.7	34.4	5.22, pg 91
Played significant role in the distribution of development schemes	18.5	55.9	Table 5.23, pg. 92
Vocal in raising issues	26	94.1	Table 5.11, pg 83, refers to Gram Sabha
Ward Members			
Raised issue in Panchayat meeting	52.2	94.1	Table 7.10, pg 137
Issues discussed/ considered	“Few times”	79.7	As above

\*From Mangubhai et al 2009, \*\*from EWR Report 2009

increase in their interaction with line departments and parallel bodies.

Even the participation of common women citizens in various activities such as attending Gram Sabha meeting, etc. has reportedly increased (68-78 percent). However, issues related to the planning for rural development works and identification of BPL families were discussed mainly by the Male Pradhans and Ward Members.

While 21 percent claimed to be self-motivated, about 22 percent said that their spouse had inspired them, which was higher in the case of women representatives (30 percent). Interestingly, members of community groups (such as Mahila Mandals, Self Help Groups, Youth Clubs, Cooperatives, etc.) seem to have played an important role, as 22 percent of elected representatives reported how they were motivated

to take the plunge in electoral politics.

However, 8 percent of the elected representatives-mainly from West Bengal, Sikkim, Tripura and Kerala-also disclosed the role of political parties in motivating them. Husbands (30 percent) and other family members (12 percent) were reported as playing an important role in motivating women representatives to contest elections the first time.

The economic status of more than half (54 percent) of the elected representatives was above the poverty line (APL) as per the village list reported by the respondents. There were a higher proportion of APL individuals in the case of Pradhans (72 percent), as compared to ward members (50 percent). Almost two-fifths (38 percent) of all EWRs were reportedly, below

the poverty line, the majority of this category being ward members (41 percent) rather than Pradhans (24 percent). This indicates, overall, that the Pradhans are better off than other Panchayat Members. However, not much difference was observed between the economic status of male and female elected representatives.

One-third of elected representatives report interactions with the police, local bureaucracy and officials in the line departments to discuss scheme and participation in elections campaigns. Taking proactive initiatives in signing petitions, participating in protests, alerting media or notifying police/court about local problems was mentioned by 24-35 percent of elected representatives.

That reservation has been critical to the representation of

disadvantaged groups is confirmed by the fact that 88 per cent of them were elected on reserved seats. Approximately 85.8 per cent of all representatives surveyed were first-timers in the Panchayats, while 14.3 percent had been elected for a second or third term. While 15 percent of women pradhans had been re-elected twice or more, 37 percent of the male pradhans had been similarly re-elected. Of the ex-EWRs interviewed, 11 percent said they had contested but lost the election, while 39 percent indicated that they did not contest a re-election because the seat had been de-reserved.

Now majority of women representatives are no more proxy of their male relative patrons. 58 percent of women representatives are now taking their own decisions to contest elections. This is a big achievement. 15 percent of women Pradhans are able to win elections second time. Women belonging to younger age groups of 21-35 years have shown better performance compared to the women belonging to the age group of 35 years and above. Women members of active committees at village level were found to be more successful at Panchayat level. Again quoting the Report, Dalits were also benefited by the whole process. Reservation has inspired and prompted them to contest elections. There can be no greater evidence for the fact that not only has Panchayati Raj attracted women to politics in large numbers, but also that this wish to contest for elections seems to be most keenly felt among the women belonging to the SCs and STs.

### **Some issues**

There is however, big difference between representation and participation. It is easier to legislate representation, but it is rather a complex and difficult task to

create conditions for participations. The proper representation does not automatically lead to proper participation. It is important that they are in a position to influence decision making and prepare and implement the schemes for economic development and social justice.

Results from a nationwide survey of women's participation in Panchayats suggest that a majority of the EWRs report an enhancement in their personal effectiveness and image after being elected. They also report a reduction in household responsibilities. There are many instances of EWR of the Panchayat taking a keen interest and playing a significant role in the workings of grassroots politics. It has often been observed that women prioritize those developmental needs that seem to be more pressing from their perspective. EWRs have initiated work on plans of bringing in piped water in the village and also to build schools as against infrastructural development favoured by men. There are number of success stories where EWR of the Panchayats have taken the lead in making efforts for smokeless stoves, crèches, community halls, and have taken the initiative in family and matrimonial matters, counseling abusive and/or alcoholic husbands. Women are also seen to be more involved in monitoring the presence of teachers and medical staff in the school or health centre, and inspecting nutrition centres under the Integrated Child Development Scheme. Sometimes, women-headed Panchayats have even experienced a dramatic increase in their revenues, sponsoring the auction of village ponds, community forests and village markets for the larger welfare of the community.

A study of Karnataka by Neema Kudva (2003) reveals

that in Karnataka, the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions has seen mixed results: it has made women more visible, decreased levels of corruption in Panchayati Raj institutions, and increased self-efficiency of women representatives. According to her gender quota is a crucial component of strategies that seek to empower women through increased participation in the political system. All the women who participated in the election or also in the election process are getting empowered. Reservation has at least succeeded in bringing the womenfolk in rural India into the political forum and elected women could now imagine standing against a man in future. This enormous expansion of women's representation in decentralized government structures has highlighted the advantages of proximity, namely the redress of grievance and most important of all the ability to mobilize struggle at a local level.

The issue of surrogate participation of women is one of those popular notions that just refuse to fade away. Yes, in some circumstances, where cultural and the social system is highly patriarchal, proxy participation continues. However, in circumstances where surrogate participation is seen the actual situation might be that the man might be playing a nurturing and consulting role, assisting the new woman entrant into the Panchayats. Further, while surrogate participation might exist for the first elected term of the woman, quite often we come across situations where women have increasingly asserted themselves, once they have gained confidence – even winning the next election on their own worth, rather than as symbols of their male backers.

Some studies suggest that Reservation brings women into



the Panchayat office but cannot really be said to empower rural Indian women due to several factors like illiteracy, language barriers, inexperience or low respect among fellow villagers. These are some of the main problems besetting active participation of women in the decision-making.

In many cases because of lack of availability of forums and lack of proper grievance redressal mechanism for gender related issues, most of women elected representatives in panchayats have very minor role in decision making and mostly they are dummy

As women are still considered one of the neglected categories in some of the regions of India, there should be a separate quorum for attendance of women and for attendance at *Gram Sabha* meetings. In view of the crucial importance of adequate women's participation in meetings of the *gram sabha*, a sub-quorum of female attendance should be built into the required quorum. Moreover, provision may be made that meetings of the *gram sabha* be preceded by meetings of the *Mahila Sabha*, comprising all adult women voters of the village panchayat, to ensure that gender concerns and preferences get fully reflected in the proceedings of the *gram sabha*.

The self-help movement has also had a far-reaching impact on the empowerment of women and several of them who have gained confidence, economic visibility and the strength of numbers through SHGs have stepped into the Panchayats. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience in governance of civic society into governance of the State. In this way, they are making the State sensitive to issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

Women's effective participation in the Panchayati Raj or the latter's usefulness for women's rights and development will become a reality only if panchayat system itself operates in a principled, self-governing, and significant way. Aureliano Fernandes (2003) in his paper "*Aggrandiser Government and Local Governance*", found that deficiencies in facilitating the potential of panchayati raj persist at three levels - state, panchayati raj institutions and societal levels." If panchayati raj has to fulfill its foundational tenets of empowering the community there is a need to recognize the primacy of societal good over individual or political goals".

Decision making processes in Panchayats need to be better defined, to diminish the possibility of elite capture, proxy participation and single point decision.

Reservations in favour of women also do not make much sense in a situation where there is emphasis on consensus in decision making because one can just as easily silence the poor as in a consensus the strongest voices prevail automatically. Thus it is easier for a situation of elite capture to prevail if business rules of representative bodies expressly prefer consensus in decision making. The emphasis on consensus in decision making should be approached with caution.

Another issue is the rotation term of reservation in Panchayats. Intervals between the rotation of reservations for women representatives need to be extended. If reservations are rotated after every 5 year term, it leaves very little incentive for the member elected on a reserved seat to perform, because she knows that next time around, there will only be a remote chance

of being elected as she will not have the benefit of reservation in the same seat.

Due to 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment over a million women have come out of their homes for the first time to hold public office and to participate in public activities, making their presence in the power struggles once dominated by men. This has been the most effective formal step towards political empowerment of women. There are many instances where women have been self-motivated to fight an election. In several instances, the *Gram Sabha* has persuaded women with leadership potential to stand for elections. The successful EWR, now act as kind of role models for the others. The increased proportion of the EWR has ensured the principles of justice between the sexes and this has certainly led to the fulfillment of certain interests of women, which may otherwise be neglected. Without the system of reservation women would have had no role to play in grass roots politics in India as statistics show, 95 percent of women claimed they would never come to acquire positions in Panchayats, if there were no provision of reserving seats for them (Centre for Women's Development Studies 1999). As with most matters of empowerment, mere political will and articulation of policies will alone not translate into benefits for women. The translation into sensitive implementation would require changes in administrative and social structures. Moreover a collaborative approach between the household, the community, the State, voluntary organizations and the media needs to be developed. The approach must also be multi-pronged, taking into account policies, laws, judicial processes, attitudes and social imaging of women. □