

Unleashing Rural Women's Potential – The Role of Panchayat Raj

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The question of women's share and participation in decision making process had been given a little importance. During the year 1928, Mahatma Gandhi said, "Women must have votes and equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where, women begin to effect the political deliberations of the nation." The Ministry of Panchayat Raj, in its mid-term Appraisal Report (2006-2007) on the status of Panchayat Raj, in India, claims that there are more elected representatives in India than the rest of the world. Undoubtedly the women are now being elected to local government in an unprecedented numbers as a result of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA).

The Indian society and polity are unique and paradoxical to many of the established notions of democracy, governance and administration. Ours is a hierarchical society based on the caste system, it is patriarchal in nature and feudal in character. Societies normally witnesses a high level of conflict based on caste, religion, region, culture, language and gender which are antithetical to representative democracy. Yet despite immense diversity, our democracy is active and vibrant at least quantitatively if not qualitatively. In the words of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi "Let us ensure maximum democracy and maximum devolution of powers, and it is high time to end the concept of power to the brokers". He uttered words three decades ago. It was made possible through the enactment of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.

The nation is celebrating the 25th anniversary of New Generation of Panchayat with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self government, giving 50% of reservation to Elected Women Representatives (EWRs). We have also witnessed a steady progress as far as the inclusion of excluded sections of our population in the decision making process especially from village to the district level. In 2015, women got elected through local governments is 13,41,773 and more than three times of this number contested in the elections. Especially the women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have secured their due share.

This is an important achievement of rural women in a hierarchical and male dominated society. The common refrain that it is the men folk in the families that control the women elected members may be partly true, but studies show that the situation is rapidly changing. Although 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act provides for only 1/3rd reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institution (PRIs) as many as 19 states have raised reservation of seats and offices of Chairpersons to women to 50% in the year 2010. There are approximately 13.45 lakh EWRs in PRIs which constitute 46.14% of total Elected Representatives. The political achievements of EWRs in PRIs were not recognized in the beginning because of social and cultural constraints and patriarchal system. They were recognized as proxies of their husbands and other male members of their families and at times as proxies of elites in the village.

Now in most of the States 4th or 5th generations of Panchayats are in place as we have almost completed a quarter century rural women have made their mark in bringing positive changes in their areas. At this juncture it is necessary to assess the impact of women's entry in to the formal structure of government from the point of view of their role in grassroots governance. Twenty Five years is a good time to assess the achievements, lost opportunities as well as the challenges ahead.

Achievements of Women EWRs :

- The mandatory inclusion of large women in rural governance is a success story which lies in the possibilities of women transforming the state within. Especially to women belonging to the Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes got their due share.
- It has provided the first step to convert grassroots leadership in to State Leadership, which may be felt to be the key to ushering in equitable and women-led development.
- Mandated representation of women in government paved a path to generate a role model effect, leading to improvements in women's wellbeing.
- Female Panchayat leaders positively influenced the adolescent girls in attaining education, shrinking the educational gender gap for the adolescent cohort.
- It has increased the female entrepreneurship in the organized sector.
- It has helped directly in improving women's welfare.
- In states like Rajasthan and West Bengal, led to more investment in public goods that directly benefit women such as drinking water supply, participation SHGs, NREGA, etc.

- Only in states with a mature Panchayat system are women candidates, who were proved to be no less than male candidates.
- There has been a noticeable change in the development of women at grassroots level. They are now more vociferous in their agreements.
- Developed good networks with their colleagues.
- Realized their rights and capabilities.
- Realization of not submitting to exploitation by dominant forces.
- Developed High Self Confidence and Knowledge about problems of their area and specific problems of women.
- Articulated and asserted for building pressure on officials for resolving their problems of their area.
- Women are givers of strength to each other and emerged as strong collective groups.
- Her entry in PRJs made her best caretaker for development of her community and constituency.
- Developed good leadership skills, conducted meeting regularly, peacefully and with patience.
- The degree of women's political empowerment has resulted in holistic and inclusive development of the society.
- Collectively, it has seen that the roots of democracy have deepened as a result of EWRs, led to the representational dynamics at the local level.
- It has generated a kind of social mobilization and resulted in silent revolution on an unprecedented scale.

Though there are many achievements, the following are some deficiencies found in the performance of EWRs:

- ❖ Hard core politics has also entered at the district and mandal levels with its short falls.
- ❖ Unfortunately, the bureaucracy and the political masters are still reluctant to allow full potential of EWRs in the development process.
- ❖ Lack of capacity of EWRs and lack of proper support mechanism in the form of requisite officials including technical manpower and access the requisite infrastructure like building, computers, internet facilities.

To overcome the above deficiencies, co-ordination and Cooperation of Government Departments and district authorities need to be ensured for elected representatives to perform their role and responsibilities efficiently. For this a system approach is required. Dr. Vina Majumdar stated that, "the task of defending the India democracy has descended on the women's movement. It has acquired the task of strengthening Indian democracy and its foundation. It has taken on the task of defending the Indian constitution as it is meant to be". Now exposure visits were provided to EWRs. The full participation of the participants is very important.

Given the severe social and political constraints – social inequalities, caste system, patriarchy, feudal setting, illiteracy, uneven development within which women had to function, the new Panchayat Raj has open-end a new chapter local governance. Two fundamental changes have come about in Indian democratic polity : (i) The democratic base of Indian polity has widened, and (ii) It has brought significant changes in India's federalism making it a multilevel federation with democratically elected women representatives in local governments at the district and below. There are several examples of the outstanding initiatives taken by panchayat Raj EWRs. There are women sarpanches like Cyber Savvy Chhavvi Rajawat of Soda village in Rajasthan, Sushma Bhadu of Dhani Miyan Khan village in Haryana and several others who have made significant difference in their communities and in the process, they became role model for others. For the gains to percolate down to the grassroots level the participation of rural women in decision making is must and Panchayat Raj system is the best way to ensure this. The struggle is on and it will be interesting to keep a watch for the future shape of the role of women in PRIs. It will certainly fulfill the vision of our Honorable Prime Minister "Sabka Sath, Sabka Gaon, Sabka Vikas" through effective women's participation. In fine, political empowerment for women at the grass root level as a process is slow but self perpetuating. Providing women with opportunities and support systems such as reservation and other affirmative action has the potential to put into motion a sustainable process for a change in gendered power relation allowing them to slowly but steadily break the shackles of existing barriers.

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