

Political Reservations for Women in Panchayats: The Saga of Representation, Participation and Inclusion

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Abstract: By contesting and getting elected to Panchayati Raj Institutions, women have shattered the saga of their own submissiveness - that women are not willing to enter politics. For women, successful grassroots experience has meant a chance to form eloquent voice, to be heard and to make a difference in their communities. However, women's representation in the decision-making positions with monitoring power is still negligible. The present rules of the game and decision-making procedure do not allow a greater participation of women and in the absence of women, there is no effort to recognize or change the game. The very absence of women at these levels thus leads to preservation and reinforcement of male-oriented and male benefiting types of decisions. Women's low self-esteem at the household level and their new role in local politics where they are now expected to function as leader creates a contradiction between women's role at home and in local government.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Reservation, Participation, Inclusion , Illusion

1. INTRODUCTION

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% 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% 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.. About one million women have come out of their homes for the first time in centuries to hold public office and to participate in public activities after 73rd constitutional Amendment Act. This has been the most effective formal step towards political empowerment of women.

It is a known fact that 40% of the elected women represented the marginalized sections and about 70% 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. Further, constitutionally mandated Panchayati Raj is still young to throw up time series analyses of any great value.

2. 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). 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 per cent had been elected for a second or third term. While 15 per cent of women pradhans had been re-elected twice or more, 37 per cent of the male pradhans had been similarly re-elected. Of the ex-EWRs interviewed, 11 per cent said they had contested but lost the election, while 39 per cent 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.

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.

There are many instances of EWR of the Panchayat taking a keen interest and playing a significant role in the workings of grassroots politics. The issue of surrogate participation of women is again 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 by men continues. However, the situation is more complex than just that. There are positive and negative trends. For instance, even in States where women have traditionally been in the background of political participation, there has been a remark-

able degree of acceptance of the participation of women in Panchayats as members and leaders. On the other hand, it would be naïve to say that even in States where women have a much better status, surrogate representation has ceased to exist – it is perhaps more sophisticated and concealed, but its ill effects are equal.

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 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.

3. THE ELUSIVENESS OF INCLUSION: LIMITATIONS OF RURAL WOMEN

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.

Some major common limitation that EWRs face in the Panchayati Raj Institutions are: Low literacy rate ;Dependence on their husbands – the Husband in many cases carries out the official works and the EWRs acts as rubber stamp);Lack of interest in panchayat works;the proportion of time spent by EWRs in household work is high ;Low retention rate: The percentage of first timer EWRs is very high on an average where as that of second timer is very low and there is hardly any third timer (MoPR study);Awareness of EWRs about Panchayati Raj system and its benefits was low;Lack of knowledge about election process in general and the reservation for women in particular,In family, the role of woman in decision making is very less and in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, the EWR is dominated by the males – husband/panchayat functionary/colleague etc.;Limited Access to information regarding Panchayat –;Training and Capacity building Training provided is not adequate and not timely;Household responsibilities, travelling alone with children, travel includes cost and time – major reasons for not attending training programmes ;The male counterparts hesitated to permit the EWRs to attend training (MoPR study)

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.

Through this, it is not only those who get elected are getting empowered formally and substantively. All the women who participated in the election or in the election process

are also getting empowered. Reservation has at least succeeded in bringing the women-folk in rural India into the political forum and elected women could now imagine standing against a man in future.

The self-help movement has 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. In many cases these SHGs are working with women representatives and building networks, which is also helping women representative in their decision making process in day to day political affairs. It can be considered that these networks need to be viewed as an important step in the direction of strengthening democracy in the country.

But some scholars like Esther Doflo is very skeptical about the reservation as the very idea of political reservation will not lead to good governance. But he does recognize that reservation is necessary for the weaker sections if the elected representatives will focus on the majority needs. He rightly pointed out another important aspect of political participation and is aspiration of leaders. According to him the potential beneficiaries of reservations have different political preferences than the majority, this would not itself be sufficient to ensure that reservations have any impact as long as candidates can commit to a policy platform in advance.

Mohanty (1995) has also questioned the empowerment of the women as the reservations not really empowered the community. According to her if reservations for women in panchayati raj institutions are to lead to their empowerment in real terms, social, economic and political conditions which facilitate and encourage their participation need to be created.. She has rightly pointed out the social hierarchies in Indian society women are by and large not decision makers. Their 'decisions' in most cases have been influenced by the wishes and dictates of the male family members. They are guided by a patriarchal social system and, therefore, are discriminated against in terms of access to food and health care. In sum, women have to cross many hurdles before becoming effective partners in the decision-making process (ibid, p.3350).

Reservation brings women into the Panchayat office but cannot really be said to empower rural Indian women due several factors like illiteracy, language barriers, inexperience or low respect among fellow villagers are some of the main problems besetting active participation in the decision-making of the majority of Panchayat members elected under reservation. Especially many female Panchayat members lack basic capabilities for working within this system. Their illiteracy, inexperience, and language barriers mean that they are not actively participating in the work of the Panchayat and are often ignored by male counterparts. Decentralization has not resulted in empowerment for these women (Ibid, P.169).

However, 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

Besides, the difficulty of many EWRs to change their age-old customs and practices is also an important reason for their being not effective in delivering development. 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

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. It is important to strengthen the system and involve greater people's participation. Panchayati Raj is often a charade in several States and political rhetoric hides their marginalization. Both the centre and the States need to bring in real devolution, which can be differentiated from the charade that Panchayati Raj has often become, as follows:

Real Devolution:	Not-so-real devolution:
Clear role assignment,	Somebody else (above or below) responsible for Panchayat performance
Power to spend money	
Power to tax	Limited power to collect resources
Discretion in spending money,	Scheme bound expenditure
Power to hire fire and control staff,	Staff owned and assigned by higher level governments,
Direct Accountability.	Somebody else (above or below) acting for the Panchayats

Second, 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.

Table 1: 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	
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 2: 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

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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

By all accounts, particularly with each election round, it is clear that women have certainly made their presence in the power struggles once dominated by men. 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 grassroots politics in India. As statistics show, 95% 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). The 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 percentage of women at various levels of political activity has shifted dramatically as a result of this constitutional change. 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.

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