

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT : PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATIRAJ INSTITUTION

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Abstract

Indian women have had little representation in institutional politics since independence. There was more concern in the last two decades towards increasing women's participation in political institutions thereby leading to empowerment. Affirmative action has been accepted as a means to political empowerment. Leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance. Women have been struggling for self-respect and autonomy. Since mid 1980's owing to questioning by women themselves about their oppressed status and plight through varied women's movements, the issue of 'women empowerment' came into focus. Women in Panchayati Raj Institution Political system and decision making process is seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution. The objective of bringing improvement in the socio-economic condition of women could be successful only by taking suitable initiatives and measures for empowering them.

Introduction

Women empowerment is the most used and discussed term today. The empowerment of women is becoming an increasingly popular term in human rights and developmental discourses. Women play significant role in all walks of life. Empowerment of women is a necessary basic condition for socioeconomic development of any society. Although women constitute one half of the population, they continue to be subjugated, unequal in socioeconomic and political status. Women have been struggling for self-respect and autonomy. Since mid 1980's owing to questioning by women themselves about their oppressed status and plight through varied women's movements, the issue of 'women empowerment' came into focus.

Political Empowerment

Empowerment of women in all spheres and in particular the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the goals of equality, development and peace. The Indian democracy which is more than half a century old has entered the next century. But a large mass of women are kept out of political arena still. There can be no true democracy, or no true people's participation in governance and development without equal participation of men and women at different levels of decision making. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women.

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Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of the country, directly or through the freely chosen representatives. A proper representation of women in political affairs will ensure their views and needs reflected in public policies that affect their lives most.

Bargava and Subha (2002), define political empowerment 'as the capacity to influence decision-making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system. It implies political participation which includes right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment'.

According to Siwal 'political empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, greater decision making power and control and to transformative action'. Political empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. Political empowerment denotes a distinct role for women in the formation of policies and influencing decision-making process by integrating them into the political system.

Holcombe observes that participation is an essential ingredient of empowerment. Empowerment represents sharing of control, the entitlement and the ability to participate, to influence decisions, as on the allocation of resources.

Indian women have had little representation in institutional politics since independence. There was more concern in the last two decades towards increasing women's participation in political institutions thereby leading to empowerment. Affirmative action has been accepted as a means to political empowerment. Leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance. Unfortunately affirmative action and women participation have failed to move beyond local government in India.

Rationale of the Study

Women empowerment has been an ongoing debate in India and elsewhere. Indian women occupying a subordinate position to men need to be empowered to overcome social, political and economic discrimination. There were several attempts to improve the position of women after India got independence. The 73rd Amendment Act is a major step towards political empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj Institutions. This has resulted in the entry of large number of women into decision making bodies in the rural areas, who were otherwise home makers. The Human Development Report relates empowerment to participation. It says that since development is for the people, they must participate fully in the decisions and processes that affect their lives (UNDP, 1995). To Oxfam empowerment means being able to challenge the existing oppression and inequality in society (Oxfam, 12995). Rowlands sees empowerment as a bottom-up process that cannot be formulated from top-down. To Rowlands, empowerment does not only mean to have access to decisionmaking but also being able and

entitled to occupy the decision-making space (Rowland, 1995). Batliwala defining it from a feminist perspective state that women empowerment should results in (a) an understanding that both men and women are equal beings regardless of their gender. Using their full potentials can help construct a more humane society for all. And that (b) men should give up the false value systems and ideologies of oppression in dealing with women (Batliwala, 1994).

The Report of the Committee on Status of Women in India, 1974, reported that since 1911, the condition of Indian women has worsened. Gender disparities were evident in employment, health, education and political participation. The new wave of decentralization in 1990's, through 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments gave 33.33% representation for women in local governments. This was seen as a road to political empowerment and gender equity. This gave opportunity for a large number of women to enter into local governments and to be a part of decision making body. Democratic decentralization is a form of governance that expands participation of subordinate groups and is responsive to their interest. It is critical for women as a subordinated group not only because of the proximity of local government to the lives of ordinary women but because the lack of democracy in gender relations excludes them from participation in governance and the consideration of their interest in the business of governmental decision-making. The Committee on the Status of Women, 1974, recommended reservation for women in local governments. Few Committee members objected to this as it will reinforce separate identity for women. Lotika Sarkar and Vina Mazumdar in favour of the recommendation said that, equality of opportunities cannot be achieved in the face of the tremendous disabilities and obstacles which the social system imposes on all those sections whom traditional India treated as second class citizens. The application of the theoretical principle of equality in the control of unequal situation only intensifies inequalities because equality in such situations merely means privileges for those who have them already and not for those who need them. Equality of opportunity cannot be achieved as there are obstacles in the social system. Decentralization with affirmative action was accepted as a means towards gender equity and political empowerment. The common problem in India is that not all states have devolved financial and administrative powers to the local government bodies. In many instances, panchayats are merely implementing agencies for various programmes and have no role in planning. These factors limit the extent of participation. Except for Kerala, no other state had allotted the percentage of budget for women development, making it difficult to press for decisions that would forward women's agenda. State has to provide more opportunity for gender equity measures. Gender advocates argue that the extent that decentralization creates opportunities for women to exercise more control over design and provisions of services and the management of resources it may benefit. Good number of women competing with men in local politics, forwarding gender related agendas is looked as a way towards gender equity.

Constraints to women's participation in politics

Ohene-Konadu points out that the current state of women's participation in politics and public decision-making is disappointing. He calls it a global phenomenon. Even from history, it is evident that men have always monopolized and dominated strategic decision-making positions. Despite considerable efforts, women still remain marginalized and under represented in those areas of public life where important decisions and policies are made. Constituting almost half of the world's population and making half of the electorate, women do have an important role to play in politics (Konadu, 2001). There are a number of factors that constrain participation of

women in politics. These can be categorized as structural, cultural and institutional factors. Structural factors comprise the 'supply side' variables'. It would include e.g. women's literacy rates, their educational levels and average incomes. Women's participation in elections will largely depend on the extent of availability of these basic resources. Structural factors as constrain to women's participation in politics are more prominent especially in developing countries where (a) limited resources are made available for e.g. for education and (b) preference is given to the education of young sons instead of daughters. Structural factors can hinder women's participation in politics as Ohene-Kunadu points out in his survey of Ghanaian women that one of the major reasons of women's low participation in local politics was the lack of personal resources (Konadu, 2001).

A general perception in societies around the world is that women's major role is to cook food, take care of the children and the household. Different societies have different social norms and values. In some societies both men and women are assigned specific roles and duties. In most of developing countries, only the reproductive role of women is recognized. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for women to participate in the public sphere of life. Cultural factors therefore offer constraint to women participation in politics. Institutional factors may also impact women's political participation. Electoral system with more seats per district and proportional formula for allocating seats can enhance women's participation (Darcy et al., 1994). Quota system is another important institutional device that can guarantee a minimum number of women seats-holders in legislature.

Women in Panchayati Raj Institution

Political system and decision making process is seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution. The objective of bringing improvement in the socio-economic condition of women could be successful only by taking suitable initiatives and measures for empowering them. Empowerment of women will not be possible unless they are provided proper representation in the political system. This objective should be achieved at desired level through making the provision of linking and associating maximum number of women in political affairs even at the lowest level of political activity. In recently introduced Panchayati Raj Institution, the policy for reservation in favour of women has therefore, been thought as an important approach to maximize their participation in the local level. Political system and decision making process in the activities of rural area. Under the 73rd amendment of constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution, one third of the total seats for scheduled caste, backward class, scheduled tribes and general caste women members in Grampradhan of village Panchayat, Block Panchayat, District Panchayat are reserved for women candidate. Conceptually, providing representation to women in Panchayati Raj Institution could be accepted as an important planning approach regarding minimizing the traditional feeling of people about the status of women in our society, particularly in terms of keeping women under the subjugation of men, imposing restrictions by the households and society against them in the avilment of certain opportunities and several other social, cultural and traditional binding disfavoring them for improving personal life style and status in existing social and economic setting. Consequently this newly introduced policy would enhance the possibilities of increasing equalities in the process of socio-economic development, participation in different activities in mutual understandings, status and role to pay in the house hold and the activities performed outside households and different decision making processes of the family among men and women. This would also develop the understanding of women

regarding their duties and right about national welfare and its integrity and they well be able to contribute effectively along with their male counterparts.

Reservation Policy

The reservations have strengthened the feeling of women empowerment is believed that planning initiatives for achieving the goal of increasing participation of women through the recently introduced Panchayati Raj Institution could be an important measure for empowering women and bringing desirable improvement in their socio-economic and political status. In this regard the policy of reservation 1/3 (50% in Bihar) seats for women in village and block and district level Panchayat was introduced. The provision were also made to strengthen the Panchayati Raj institutions by providing various administrative rights and duties, financial power and the freedom to make, initiatives for generating finances locally from different sources.

Reality of Empowering Women

Considering the involvement and domination of women in different activities, historical experiences regarding their participation in various regional movements associated to different level and pattern of awareness about the regional development and maintaining traditional value system and having relatively better educational attainment it is expected that the introduction of Panchayati Raj Institution and reservation policy for women in the Panchayat could be an important instrumental measure of achieving improvement in the socio-economic status and strengthening the empowerment of women in meerut division. However, the motive of policy introduction an empowerment women would mainly depend upon its implementing process, socio-economic and political background and characteristics of elected women representatives in the village Panchayats. Factors such as the attitude and intention of elected women towards the initiation of various development programmes and capacity in making efforts in linking different segments of village population with the introduced programmes also matter very much in improving the status of women representatives in the social environment of the village Panchayats. As a consequence this process would lead to increase and strength empowerment of women.

Conclusion

It has to be considered that the inclusion of well qualified women in village Panchayat at the initial state of the interlocution of Panchayati Raj Institution in rural areas would be an important instrumental measure in planning for improving social status and empowering women. This group of women, if provided representation at village Panchayat level can strongly rise in the issues related to the betterment of women, can play dominant role in decision making process and make suitable recommendation for improving the status of women in the meeting. Its creates opportunities for women to exercise more control over design and provisions of services and the management of resources it may benefit. Good number of women competing with men in local politics, forwarding gender related agendas is looked as a way towards gender equity.

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