



Women Empowerment in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract:

In Indian democracy Panchayati Raj plays a significant role at grass-root level. In Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj was enacted in Act of 1989 before four years of Panchayati Raj Amendment Act of 73rd of Indian union in 1993. Under this Act the first Panchayat election was held after a gap of 12 years in 2001 was not successful due to armed conflict. Recently in 2011 Panchayat election was held in J&K is successful compared to last Panchayat Elections. In present study different challenges are discussed before Panchayati Raj in Jammu and Kashmir. Women's presence in rural governance institutions has remained minor. Rural self-governing bodies like the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were dominated by men. Mostly women facing problems due to cultural traits they are dominated by male members due to this they can't take decisions independently. In the case of Jammu and Kashmir, institutions of rural governance too remained under the control of men until the State provided reservation for 33 percent women in 2002. The Panchayati elections held in 2011 gave women an opportunity to ensure wider representation. Women's participation was carried out with the help of various indicators like participation in village affairs before elections, attending training programmes, raising of issues independently, etc. The political awareness of the elected members has been studied through the following components like awareness about the tenure of Halqa panchayats, women's quota, etc

Key words: Political Participation, Male dominated, Women Representation, Women Reservation, and Challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term Panchayati Raj is a system in which gram panchayats are basic units of administration. It has been established in all the states of India by the acts of the state legislature to build democracy at grass-root level. The government of India appointed a Balwant Rai Mehta Committee in January 1957 to study the Community Development and National Extension Service programmes, especially from the point of view of assessing the extent of popular participation, and to recommend the creation of institutions through which such participation could be achieved. The Committee recommended the constitution of statutory elected local bodies with the necessary resources, power and authority devolved to them and a decentralized administrative system working under their control. Rajasthan was the first state to establish Panchayati Raj (Bhat AH 2016). The first election under the Act of 1989 was held in 2001 after a gap of 12 years, although they could not be successful in all parts of the state due to the prevailing situation. The Panchayat bodies could not, therefore, become functional in the State in the last two decades. In the intervening years, Panchayat institutions in other parts of the country have evolved with the backing of the 73rd Amendment act 1993 to the Constitution of India. The Amendment envisions a larger and vibrant role for Panchayati Raj has been recognized with wider power and financial resources not merely as institutions of political participation but institutions of social and economic development. The strengthening of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), with properly defined role in local planning, decision-making and supervision, is being advocated as an essential part of the governance reforms agenda by both the

government as well as civil society groups. Recently in 2011 Panchayat election were held in Jammu and Kashmir after 23 years at all the three levels viz; village, block and district level. As per the Cabinet Decision No.40/3/2011 dated 09-02-2011 and Cabinet Decision No. 170/21/2011 dated 21.09.2011 vide Government Order No: 1126-GAD of 2011 dated 22-09-2011, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir ordered the devolution of functions and activities to these Institutions as specified in Annexure I to XIV has specified the devolution of functions and activities to these institutions in respect of 14 departments. The Panchayati election was held in 16 rounds from April to June 2011. The Panchayat elections were quite vibrant compared to the last Panchayat elections which were held in 2001, these were much more meaningful and participatory. The number of Sarpanches and Panchs in the state were 4,130 and 29,719 respectively, out of which 9424 were women, with State level average voter turnout of about 77.71 percent (University of Kashmir 28-29 Sep 2013). All Sarpanches and Panchs were duly elected in accordance with the provision of Jammu and Kashmir Panchayat Raj act, 1989. The young people and women were quite involved in the electoral process with many of them joining the election fray as the candidates for Panch and Sarpanch constituencies. This election shows the positive impact on women and youth in political participation at grass root level. The Panchayats are expected to play an important role in ruler development of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly after 2011. It was the great achievement of National Conference government to make the Panchayati Raj elections possible as the conditions were not favorable in Jammu and Kashmir (Govt of J&K 2011). The institution of Panchayati Raj in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (Jand K) has its own unique history. The ongoing

political crisis in the state has not allowed for any social reconstruction projects to move forward. Empowering grass root political institutions has been an old ideal of the National Conference and is mentioned in the 'New Kashmir Manifesto'. This ideal was incorporated into the constitution of the state, and made it obligatory for the state to take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as a unit of self-government (Chowdary, R 2001). The structure and process of Panchayats are equally pivotal as they bring to bear and entitle role member therein to perform. If the overall scenario of Panchayats was largely despairing, another disquieting aspect is that almost one half of rural population was virtually kept out of Panchayat arena. In the traditional Caste Panchayats, Village Panchayats and in the British Scheme of local governments women remained entirely excluded. (Nagendra 2004).

2. WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:

Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved (Ambedkar S.N. & Shailaja Najindra 2005). The most of the women entered the Panchayat Raj Institution due to persuasion by their family members and pressure from the village community, pressure from political party and their personal interests (Panda 1997). The women leaders had links with one or the other political party as such members were persuaded and astonished by their political mentors who were already in politics. Till date we come across that women are supported by political parties reason being affiliation to such political and constitutional change is making women to some extent as a puppet in such organizations. This is also fact that there is a change in number of women coming into political activity and is struggling hard. However, it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of the government (Gowda 1998). Political participation in a democracy has got a wider connotation now, which ranges from popular participation in electing representatives to the actual participation of representatives in the process of governance. Verba, Schzoman and Brady (1993) define political participation in democratic context as those activities, which have "the intent or effect of influencing government action - either directly by the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies "In India like other states, the position of women in the state of Jammu and Kashmir remained subordinate all over the state. Moreover the problems of women have been further enhanced due to age old political system in the state. However from the early decades of 20th century, women in the state of J&K got conscious about their subjugation due to emergence of political consciousness, expansion of modern education, spread of cultural awareness and deterioration of economic conditions. Women participated in socio-political movements in 1930's and the subsequent years there has been raising pattern of women leadership in the state politics of Jammu and Kashmir. The groups like women's wing of peace brigade and women's resistance force are worth maintaining in this regard,

undoubtedly, the political representation of women in the state is far from satisfactory due to less political consciousness and the cross fire of conflict between India and Pakistan, but there has been seen rising political awareness among women in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Role of women in Panchayati Raj institutions (PRI's) is attracting a lot of serious attention in the present context in the state. The present study examines the role of women in the political arena and their growing political consciousness with special focus of identifying the causes responsible for their marginal representation in the state politics.

3. RESERVATION OF WOMEN:

One of the biggest setbacks that the women of the state have faced in last few years relates to the provisions of the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Indian constitution. These amendments related to the panchayati raj institutions (PRI's) have brought about a silent revolution by the provisions related to 33 % reservation for women in the institutions in the local self-government. They have brought a drastic transformation in India as far as participation of women at the grass root level politics is concerned. As per an estimate there are nearly seven lakh women Panches, Sarpanches and the chairpersons of Panchayat. The institution of rural local self government however, in J & K the participation of women remains nadir in the local bodies. As compared to elsewhere the number of women contesting the Panchayat elections has remained significantly low in the state. In the Panchayat elections held in J & K in 2002 after a span of 23 years, out of total candidates only 2.46 % were women. As far as results are concerned out of total 22,700 elected Panchs and Sarpanches only 28 and 2 respectively are women (Khurshheed Shafeeq 2015). In 2011 the state government of J & K passed a law reserving one -third of the seats for women in panchayats, gross -root administrative bodies in villages. Each Panchayat consists of five Panchs and is lead by a Sarpanch. Women succeed in gaining one -third of Panch seats in 2011, according to state records but a female Sarpanch is still rare only three women won the 2125 Sarpanch seats in Kashmir and 25 women won the 1956 seats in Jammu (Ashwani Kumar October 2012).

4. WOMEN REPRESENTATION:

Women play a vital role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision-making. Incentives in the form of the sitting fee for attending Panchayat meetings and rewards for doing extraordinary work in panchayats can be of great help in motivating women to participate effectively. India, the largest democracy in the world, has only 10.8 percent representation of women in the Lok Sabha, with 59 out of 545 members as women. The Rajya Sabha has only nine percent women, that is, only 21 women out of a total of 233 members. The question of women's representation in politics in all over the world began to assume importance from 1975 when the United Nations (UN) declared 1975 as the 'International Women's Year'. This was followed by the UN's decade for Women (1976-1985) with the theme "Equality, Development and Peace". The UN Declaration compelled the national government to shift the emphasis of its women's programmes from welfare to development. More attention was given to health, education and employment (Mohanty, M 1995). Though in recent times a large number of

strategies and measures have been taken to promote women's political status around the world, yet women in almost all the countries continue to be under represented and marginal in political decision making bodies (Farza Bari 2005). In India, the question of women's participation in decision-making processes got the attention of the Committee for Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974.

The status report by CSWI in India titled 'Towards Equality' (1974) revealed that even after 27 years of independence, women were not only performing the traditional roles expected of them by men, but were also largely illiterate, had poor health, were marginalized in employment opportunities, suffered physical, emotional and mental violence, and had no role in the decision-making process in any sphere of life. The CSWI report recommended women's quota at the panchayat level (Singla, P 2007).

5. CHALLENGES OF WOMEN AND MALE DOMINANT:

The study of Panchayati Raj in action, challenges to women's Role focuses on the experiences of women in the election process, the hardships and obstacles they undergo and kind of support in terms of remedial measures to overcome in the light of the provisions of the Panchayat Acts (Susheela Kaushiks 1995). The study revealed that women members are facing lot of problems in Panchayat and male members do not cooperate with elected women ward members. The reservation of women in such organization alone will not help them to make decisions unless they become assertive (Palanithuri 1999). Women everywhere are breaking the glass ceiling in politics but their voices still go unheard and their contributions are too often sidelined. In many places women are still seen as incapable of taking on responsibility in what are perceived as male-oriented areas, such as finance, energy, economic development, climate change, foreign affairs, defense, trade and infrastructure. This is often the case in parliaments where women are given 'women's only' portfolios or only allowed to sit in women committees and are being pushed away from the other committees because of their gender. Not just parliaments but all levels of government need to adopt affirmative action measures and amend the internal rules so as to give preference to women over men (according to their capabilities) for decision-making positions (including ministerial positions, committee chairs and leadership positions in the Parliament Bureau) in cases, where qualifications are equal or commensurate with their representation in the government. The emergence of new trend has drastically changed the domain of women politics and relationship during the last five decades. The increasing involvement of women in the mainstream politics and the impact of feminist movements all over the world led to an entirely different approach towards the role of women in politics. Taking as its starting point the politics in the broadest sense as an enterprise dominated by male, the new approach started exploring several new issues connected with the role of women in politics. Subsequently, women's participation in politics has emerged as a new field of interest as well as research in different social sciences. The focus of this new field is not only pointed towards the women's participatory trends but also towards the implications of male dominated politics for women. This trend also tried to offer a theoretical frame work for the understanding

of gender dimension of politics (Kamla Devi Chatopadhaya 1937).

6. METHODOLOGY:

The present study is essentially an investigation to describe and analyze the Role and Developmental Activities of women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions. For the purpose of this study, Jammu and Kashmir is selected. The required data is collected from secondary sources. The secondary data is collected from sources like library, published books on research area. Articles published in Journals, Central and state government records, various commissions reports, unpublished documents etc. Also referred to information from Government files, brochures, and records available in different offices. Above all, the field observations, experience and knowledge is added to strengthen the study.

7. OBJECTIVES:

1. To know the role of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and their political consciousness in J & K.
2. To examine the participation of women in panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) in J & K.
3. To highlight the trends in the recruitment of women candidates in PRIs.
4. To explore the constraints faced by women in performing their role in electoral politics.

8. CONCLUSION

The current legislation ensures empowerment of rural women who did not fight Panchayat elections in large numbers which was evident from the fact that in Jammu division only 246 women Sarpanches and Panches were elected as against 20,548 Panches and 2,700 Sarpanches in J&K. The reservation for women in Panchayat constituencies will ensure their greater participation in managing the affairs of the grass root level democratic institutions. Women's entry into local government in such large numbers, often more than the required 33.3 percent, and their success in campaigning, including the defeat of male candidates, has shattered the myth that women are not interested in politics, and have no time to go meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party processes. Women's experience of PRI has transformed many of them. The elements of this transformation include empowerment, self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of identity. Role of women is a need in panchayati raj institutions. It will enhance both the quality and quantity of human resources with which development is possible. Thus if any nation has to build up women development is must. Any improvement in the status of women is almost impossible without cooperation and change of hearts from the part of men. On the other hand, it is also very important to come up self-consciousness and awareness in each individual women. In panchayati raj institutions the position of women is again far from satisfactory. Like other Indian states, they remain on the edge of the political system. The Women's presence in the political process of J & K is dreadfully low. So,

there is an urgent need to bridge the gender gap in the State because no society and civilization can move forward without the participation of women.

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