

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN INDIAN PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS: SELECTED CASE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the impact of women's participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the reservations being implemented in Tamil Nadu towards the process of women empowerment. The study on participation of women in local governance plays a pivotal role in the general process of advancement of women. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all level of decision-making the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. The changes taking place in the realm of women due to 73rd Amendment in the modern era are important for understanding of the differences between traditional and modern social structure. It should examine and elucidate that how change in agents i.e. reservation and participation of women in local governance are raising consciousness of women's issues and bringing about the changes in the institutional structures and processes influencing the governance discourse in itself. So the present study of women in local governance assumes greater importance in the contemporary society, especially so for women. Many of the Indian Scholars have eminent contribution on the concept of governance at the grassroots and role of women in it. They have greatly contributed into the notion of governance and participation of women in public and private domain.

OBJECTIVE: The main objective of this study is to measure the level of empowerment among elected women representatives.

METHODOLOGY: This research study is carried out using case study method. The details of the results of the present study is presented in this paper.

KEYWORDS: Women Empowerment, Participation, Local Self Governance, Panchayat Raj Institutions, 73rd Amendment, Reservations And Case Study.

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INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, the political life of rural women has gained considerable attention due to factors like rise of reservation, awareness and legislative measures like 73rd Amendment of constitution, which have affected the role of women in local governance. The present study seeks to explore the participation of women in local governance with special reference to women of rural areas in Tamil Nadu, India.

The enforcement of 73rd Amendment has various implications for the empowerment of women. It has created a silent revolution. However, in our view, the reservation itself can only be regarded as the first step in this direction. It is necessary to create proper social, economic and political conditions to enable women to participate effectively in the local government institutions without endangering the positive values of the prevailing family system. Nonetheless the act has ushered a new era in which the villagers can at least try to decide their own destiny (Mohanty, 1996).

The study on participation of women in local governance plays a pivotal role in the general process of advancement of women. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all level of decision-making the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. The changes taking place in the realm of women due to 73rd Amendment in the modern era are important for understanding of the differences between traditional and modern social structure. The study should examine and elucidate that how change in agents i.e. reservation and participation of women in local governance are raising consciousness of women's issues and bringing about the changes in the institutional structures and processes influencing the governance discourse in itself. So the study of women in local governance is

important aspect of the changing society especially in making women's empowerment a reality.

Women's 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. So, what is the significance of empowerment through Panchayati Raj?

According to the document on Women's Development (1985) women's role in the political process has virtually remained unchanged since independence. Broad-based political participation of women has been severely limited due to various traditional factors such as caste, religion, feudal attitude and family status. As a result, women have been left on the periphery of political life. It is against this background that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act came to provide them an opportunity to take active part in decision-making process in the local level.

Devaki Jain (1994) in her analysis of the 73rd constitutional amendment writes that the main intention of the policy makers behind this reservation is two-fold one is the democratic justice and second is resource utilization (human). She further states that as half of the population are women, the country's development cannot be achieved without the proper participation of woman.

PANCHAYAT RAJ

Panchayat Raj is a system of governance in India which gram panchayats are the basic units of administration. It has 3 levels: Grama Panchayat for a village or group of villages, a Block level and the Zilla Panchayat at the district level.

CASE STUDY

There are multiple definitions and understandings of the case study. According to Bromley (1990), it is a "systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest". The unit of analysis can vary from an individual to a corporation. While there is utility in applying this method retrospectively, it is most often used prospectively. Data come largely from documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artifacts (Yin, 1994).

Basically, a case study is an in depth study of a particular situation rather than a sweeping statistical survey. It is a method used to narrow down a very broad field of research into one easily researchable topic.

The case study research design is also useful for testing whether scientific theories and models actually work in the real world. You may come out with a great computer model for describing how the ecosystem of a rock pool works but it is only by trying it out on a real life pool that you can see if it is a realistic simulation.

For social work researcher, psychologists, anthropologists and other social scientists they have been regarded as a valid method of research for many years. Scientists are sometimes guilty of becoming bogged down in the general picture and it is sometimes important to understand specific cases and ensure a more holistic approach to research.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

AIM

To obtain in-depth information about how the women are participating and performing their role in Panchayat Raj Institutions as elected women representatives.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research paper are:

- To understand the local governance systems in India
- To study the level of empowerment among elected women representatives.
- To elicit the barriers in participation as perceived by the elected women representatives and
- To suggest suitable measures to improve the level of women's participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Women elected to panchayats on the basis of quotas have often been labeled as 'proxy women', because they could be placed in the local council as stand-ins for their husbands, who might even participate in the meetings in their place. In other parts of the world as well, women in politics, especially those elected through quotas, might be seen as 'token women'. Research on 'quota' women has revealed many cases of purely symbolic representation of women, especially if the women elected have no power base in a constituency of their own, or in the parties or in strong movements outside the political institutions.

The elected women member's participation in local government bodies remains generally insignificant, as they are not given any specific duties. The absence of operational guidelines and terms of reference for female elected representatives, the limited capacity of the female elected representatives to operate in public institutions of this nature, the lack of awareness over their roles and responsibilities, the systematic discrimination and biases by male elected colleagues all these are seen as factors impeding women's meaningful participation in local government (ADB,

2001:14). However, there are also many success stories of women who felt totally isolated and powerless in the beginning but eventually gained confidence and influence.

PARTICIPANTS

The elected women representatives in the rural local bodies were the participants of this research paper. 2 ward members and 1 Panchayat President were interviewed for this purpose.

CASE STUDY-1

Ms. Dhanalakshmi w/o Mr. Senthilkumar aged 33, is a ward member from Semipalayam Panchayat, Palladam Block from Tiruppur District. Her educational qualification is +2, and she is currently pursuing her BSW in distance education. She started her career as a field level staff of an NGO in Tiruppur district. Her husband is working in a private company nearby their locality. She got married sixteen years before and has two daughters and is living in an extended family with her mother in law and husband. She is not affiliated to any political party. She was elected from the ward which was reserved for women. Totally seven candidates contested and she got 151 votes out of 250 polled votes. Her family members and the general public supported her and motivated her to contest in the local body election. Though she started her career as a grass root level worker, she has equipped herself with the requisite knowledge to become a trainer for all Panchayats. She now trains the elected representatives of her district on the implementation of government schemes. She puts forth a humble request to her colleagues, who have been elected in PRIs, to act on their own. She is concerned that in most of her training sessions their male counter parts from the family are participating. She also suggested the following measures for increasing and ensuring women's real participation in PRIs:

awareness generation on the importance of their role, motivation from all levels, attitudinal change on the part of women and government's initiatives to curb proxy representation of the elected women representatives.

CASE STUDY-2

Ms. J. Stella Mary aged 34 hails from Tiruchirappalli district. She is a ward member of Alunthur Panchayat in Manikandam Block. She is elected for the first time from her ward which is a reserved constituency for women. She has studied upto 12th Standard. Her family's occupation is agriculture. She is married and has three school going sons. She feels privileged to have been elected from among the four contestants, who all happen to be her close relatives. She gained the confidence that she can spend quality time to work for the welfare of her ward as she was a home maker. On her taking charge of office she has displayed information boards in all streets of her ward encouraging the public to air their grievances regarding public affairs and ensures need based sorting out of those issues at the earliest. She did not get any training on PRI systems and she has taken her own efforts to learn from multifarious sources the requisite knowledge for better sensitization of the public regarding schemes and welfare measures of the PRI. Since she does not have any political affiliation she has the autonomy to implement her societal initiatives. Her husband is supportive to all her Panchayat level activities. He enthuses in her a sense of confidence and is a constant source of motivation to her, resulting in her enhanced participation in Panchayat and block level activities for the betterment of her ward people. She emphasized the need for pertinent trainings to women representing the PRI in order to equip them with the required skill set that would ensure not only their own empowerment but would also the

empowerment of the women folk in their community.

CASE STUDY-3

Ms. Jesumary aged 52, is the Panchayat President of Michelpattinam Panchayat, Mudukulathur Block in Ramanathapuram District. Her husband is an agriculturist and two of her sons are married and one son is doing his engineering. This is the 4th consecutive term for her in office, ever since she contested in 1996 she has tasted only success in the local body elections. She did her PUC from Fathima College, Madurai and commenced her career as a volunteer in Ariyoli Iyyakkam (Adult Education Programme). Her father was a social activist who in turn inspired her to contest in local body elections. In 1996, she was elected unanimously, as an unopposed candidate for the presidentship. Initially her family rendered a helping hand in her Panchayat level activities, later she developed self confidence and started using her autonomy for decision making. Her dedication and tireless contribution for the welfare of her panchayat members have won her more than 10 National and State awards, which stands as a testimony for her outstanding performance in local governance.

Her endeavors saw her panchayat to reach the magical mark of 100 % attainment in 'rain water harvesting', 'Sanitation' and 'Small Savings'. She was awarded the Nirmal Gram Puraskar National award for an "Open Defecation Free" village as all houses, Schools and Anganwadis are having and using only sanitary toilets and Uthamar Gandhi Award for her performance in terms of revenue collection and implementation of innovative projects both of which stands out as stellar performances among the many feathers in her cap. In 2003, World Bank invited her to participate in an international conference on sustainable water

management held at USA for her outstanding performance in rain water harvesting. She readily participated and shared her experience in local governance and her contributions to the international delicacies. She has undergone innumerable trainings related to PRI from NIRD, SIRD and RIRD. These capacity building initiatives are the cornerstone of her success. Now she has become a trainer and motivator for other Panchayat Presidents in southern districts of Tamil Nadu. Government has recognized her Panchayat as model training cum exposure visit centre for other panchayats. Time management, participatory planning, courageous decision making and self confidence are the key for her success.

PARTICIPATION BARRIERS ELICITED

Power relations that prevent women from participating in decision-making bodies operate at many levels. Through the case studies it has been observed that the role of women in local bodies/ politics has been limited by factors such as:

- Cultural and social norms that restrict women from participating in local body elections;
- Perceptions of men as more competent leaders and decision-makers;
- Lack of recognition that women's views need to be equally valued;
- Lack of capacity building and economic dependency
- Lack of legal mechanisms and normative frameworks that protect women's rights and their equality with men;
- Political platforms that do not address women's concerns;
- Higher rates of illiteracy among women; and
- Public and private forms of violence against those active in politics.

SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE AND MOTIVATE THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The following points were suggested by the participants for the betterment of the elected women's participation in panchayat raj institutions:

- Frequent capacity building programmes for the elected women representatives of rural local bodies.
- Inculcation of self worth and decision making capacity among the elected women representatives of rural local bodies will enable them to make meaningful contributions to their ward/ panchayat.
- During the conduct of the block level meetings and other trainings only the elected women representatives of rural local bodies should be entertained. The relatives and family members should not be allowed give proxy representations. The government machinery should strictly adhere to this norm if they are committed to the cause of women empowerment.
- The Government should take necessary steps to stop the involvement other family members of the elected women representatives in the routine day to day functioning of rural local bodies.

CONCLUSION

The concept of grass root level democracy for women in self governance at both rural and urban levels has not lived up to the mark in our country. The 73rd amendment seeks to radically alter the power relations in the villages by reserving seats for scheduled castes, tribes, backward classes and women. However, in the absence of proper education, training and economic independence, these groups are unable to assert themselves. Illiteracy, poverty and unemployment are the major handicaps in our society. Urgent steps need to be taken to

effectively deal with these problems in order to facilitate participatory development. However there is no denying the fact that though the provision for reservation of seats for women has been manipulated by their male counterparts mostly their husbands it has certainly empowered them to some extent. They are increasingly becoming aware of their rights and responsibilities and are asserting themselves in certain cases. If the suggestions to improve the elected women representative's participation are effectively considered and implemented by the government machinery especially with regard to preventing proxy representatives it would pave the way for women's political empowerment and down the line ensure the empowerment of women in all walks of their lives.

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