

THE INHERENT IMPEDIMENTS AND HURDLES IN EXTENDING A LEGITIMATE SPACE FOR WOMEN LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: the Government of India has declared the year 2001 as Year for the Empowerment of Women, but the struggle to reach this stage has been long and arduous. One-third reservation of seats for women in local bodies through the constitutional amendments had opened new ways for the women in the power structure to occupy a legitimate space. The inherent impediments and hurdles associated with the women in Indian society are common to the elected women too. Yet, they occupy an important position in Indian political system and perform their role and responsibility faithfully, and prove that they are here to stay and make their contribution in the newly assigned role.

Keywords: Empowerment, Panchayats, Participation, Reservation.

Introduction: In India, the panchayati raj system existed since ages ago in one form or the other. Even today around 70 percent population lives in rural area, hence the rural sector occupies a very important place. But till the passage of 73rd Amendment Act, women were not play any significant role in the process of development of society in general and development of women in particular, due to many social evils like illiteracy, pardah system, child marriage, etc. which are existed in our society.

As panchayat is the lowest form of government, it is the best system to empowering women, because it gives a chance to rural women to come out from their home and take an active part in decision making.¹ At the declaration of 'Swaraj' Gandhiji also said that, "as long as women of India do not take part in public life there can be no salvation for the country. I would have no use for the kind of Swaraj to which such women have not made their full contribution. The dream of decentralization could never be fulfilled."²

Historical Background: To understand the level of women's participation in panchayati raj system in India, we have to look back and evaluate their journey in rural administration. In Colonial Period, the question of representation of different population groups in panchayats was not considered. In the first official initiative for constituting statutory village panchayat, the question of women's representation was not even raised.³ Thus, during British Period women were not allowed to take part in decision making and only the male residents who paid rent, land revenue or tax or had a stipulated annual income were eligible to contest elections.⁴

Once India got independence the question of women's limited representation or rather say token representation has raised at the national and state levels from time to time. The Central Council of Local Government in its third meeting held in Srinagar in 1957 recorded that the elected representatives "will co-opt two women".⁵ it was at the same time when Balwant Rai Mehta Committee also recommended

the provision to co-opt two women who are interested in the activities relating to the welfare of women and children, in all the three tiers of the panchayat, after the election had been held.

Women joined the panchayats by following the recommendation of the Committee by co-option rather than election. But the result was not encouraging and women continue to remain invisible and marginalized in decision making bodies. It was only with the setting up of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI, 1971) that the demand for greater representation of women in political institution in India was taken up in a systematic way. Earlier the focus of the growing women's movement had been only on improving women's socio-economic position. In the CSWI Report 'Towards Equality' (1974) the Committee reveals that political parties have "tended to see the women voters and citizens as appendages of the males.....". It also refers to the tokenism involved in having a few women in the legislature and executive, who are unable to act as spokespersons for women's rights on account of their dependent and minority status. The Report recommended the establishment of Statutory Women's Panchayats at the village level and said that political parties should adopt a definite policy regarding the percentage of women candidates.⁶

Again in 1977 a Committee was set up under the chairmanship of Ashoka Mehta to look into the matter and suggest measures for better participation of women in local bodies. The Committee also continued women's token representation but it suggested that if no women were elected, two women who would get the highest number of votes in Zila Panchayats election should become members. If no woman coming forward for election then two women might be co-opted.⁷

Despite all this, representation of women in PRIs was very low which can be seen from the table I

S. No.	Name of the States	Gram Panchayat	Panchayat Samiti	Zila Parishad	Remarks
1.	Andhra Pradesh	2-4	2	2	Mahakuma Parishad at Sub-Divisional Level
2.	Assam	2	0	1	
3.	Bihar	0	2	2	
4.	Gujarat	2	2-3	3-5	
5.	Haryana	1	2	0	
6.	Himachal Pradesh	1-2	2	2	
7.	Kerala	1	0	0	
8.	Karnataka	1-2	2	1	
9.	Madhya Pradesh	2	2	0	
10.	Maharashtra	2	1-2	2	
11.	Orrisa	0	1	0	
12.	Punjab	2	2	4	
13.	Rajasthan	2	2	2	
14.	Tamil Nadu	1	3	0	
15.	Uttar Pradesh	0	5	3-5	
16.	West Bengal	2	2	2	

Source: Ashoka Mehta Committee (Annexure 3A and 3B)

Note: Orrisa Zila Parishad abolished since November 1968.

As detailed in the Ashoka Mehta Committee the strength of the Gram Panchayats varies from 5-9 in Haryana to 7-25 in West Bengal. The strength of Gram Panchayats (as they stood in 1977) as specified in the Panchayat Acts of different States are given in table II

S. No.	Name of the States	Number of Members
1.	Andhra Pradesh	7-19
2.	Assam	Up to 15
3.	Bihar	9
4.	Gujarat	7-15
5.	Haryana	5-9
6.	Himachal Pradesh	7-11
7.	Kerala	8-15
8.	Karnataka	11-19
9.	Madhya Pradesh	10-25
10.	Maharashtra	7-15
11.	Orrisa	11-25
12.	Punjab	5-11
13.	Rajasthan	5-20
14.	Tamil Nadu	5-15
15.	Uttar Pradesh	7-15
16.	West Bengal	7-25

Source: Same as above.

From the Table I and Table II it can be seen that the representation of women was very low in comparison to the strength of the Gram Panchayats. Thus, this norms of co-optation was nothing but injustice to the women community because in most of the cases women entered in the local bodies not through the elections but by the co-optation or nomination.

After that the question of reservation of seats was left to the National Perspective Plan for Women to take up. The Commission recommended that 30 percent seats should be reserved for women in all rural Local Self-Governing Bodies at all three levels. Despite this it is clear that proper thought has not been given for integrating women into the representation and

leadership roles, because at the lowest level, the principle of reservation has been applied only in respect of women's membership in Gram Panchayats and not to the offices of Sarpanch.⁸

73rd Constitutional Amendment Act: In the year 1992, another legislation, the 73rd Amendment Bill was introduced in Parliament which adopted it in the same year. This Act gives the constitutional status to the panchayats and being viewed as a landmark in the constitutional history of the country and as a revolutionary decision for changing the position of women in India.

For the empowerment of women the Act has provided that at least one-third of the total seats at all levels shall be reserved for women of whom one-third shall be from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In this context it is important to note that at least one-third of the total numbers of the offices of Chairpersons at all levels will also be reserved for the women.

After the passing of the 73rd Amendment Act, the major changes took place and about one million women entered in the first election of panchayats. The representation of women increased from 2-3% to at least 30-32% in many States.

S. No.	States	Overall Percentage in G.Ps. 1985	Overall Percentage in G.Ps. 1995
1.	Gujarat	Only 2 women	33.3%
2.	Haryana	Only 2 women	33.1%
3.	Karnataka	Only 1-2 women	37.0%
4.	Madhya Pradesh	2 women	38.0%
5.	Kerala	1 women	38.2%
6.	Punjab	2 women	30.2%
7.	Rajasthan	2 women	32.4%
8.	West Bengal	2 women	35.4%
9.	Uttar Pradesh	0 women	29.6%

Source: Panchayati Raj Development Report 1995. Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

*G.P. - Gram Panchayat

The above Table III shows the comparison between year 1985 and 1995. Whereas before 1985 only 2 women participated in PRIs in each of the States of Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan and West Bengal, in 1995 their representation increased to 33.3 percent, 33.1 percent, 38 percent, 30.2 percent, 32.4 percent and 35.4 percent respectively. As regard the State of U.P., there was no representation of women before 1985 but after 1995, they occupied 29.6 percent representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions.⁹

With the advent of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, it was made possible for women, once oppressed and neglected in the society, to stand on an equal platform of decision making and authority with men. This increase participation of women is not limited on the papers only, many women done a good work in their villages and set an example.

There are various factors which have discouraged the participation of women in politics like criminalization of politics, illiteracy, lack of awareness, problem of Pradhan Pati, etc. but all these problems can be solved by given them proper education and training. Despite of the possibility of women representatives emerging as a mere proxies, there is a need for reservation of seats for them because of their social and economic conditions. Statistics also showed that they would never have acquired a significant position in panchayats if there were no reserved seats for them. But along with reservation other steps like awareness generation through propaganda, training, media publicity, etc. should be taken up to make it really effective in empowering women.¹⁰

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