

Women Empowerment through Panchayati Raj: A Study of the Working of Panchayats in Assam

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Abstract

Women empowerment is considered as an important issue by the policy makers in India from the times of the colonial rule. The empowerment of women is sought to be achieved by constitutional provisions by making women a part of the governmental process in the grassroots level through panchayati raj system. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 provides for 33% reservation for women and other weaker sections in Panchayats. The elected women representatives despite various obstacles can empower themselves and also act as the examples for the others to emulate. This paper tries to study the role of women in panchayats in the state of Assam

Keywords: Panchayats; women; empowerment; constitution; development.

Introduction

Empowerment of women is considered as one of the important goals in any society across the globe. Empowerment is related to the word power. It means the ability or capacity of individuals to gain more control over their life and the resources that influence the condition of life by themselves or with the help of others. Rapport (1984) defines empowerment as 'Empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their lives'. Empowerment refers to measures designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self determination in people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interest in a responsible and self determined way, acting on their own authority. Women empowerment is the challenge to the ideology of patriarchy and the gender based discrimination against women in all institutions and structures of society. It is the transformation of the structures of subordination, including changes in the laws, civil codes, property and inheritance rights, control over women's bodies and labour and the social and legal instructions that endorse male control. The panchayats provide the opportunities to women to participate in the electoral politics of the democracy by which they can enhance their self esteem and also contribute to the developmental process of their locality. The process of women empowerment begins in the mindset by changing their belief about their rights, capacities and potentials. But this change of mindset is possible initially by laws enacted by the State.

Objectives: The objectives of the study are-

- a. To study constitutional provisions relating to the panchayati raj system.
- b. To study the working of the panchayats in Assam.
- c. To study the role of women in panchayats.

Methodology:

This paper is based on the study of related literature on the broader subject of the function of the panchayats as grassroots democratic institution. It relies on secondary data obtained from various books, journals, magazines, pamphlets and other archival records, both official and non official. The study is analytical and descriptive.

Discussion:

One of the Gandhian Principles in the Directive Principles of State Policy state that the State shall introduce village panchayats as grassroots democratic institutions for decentralization of power and authority. The panchayati raj institutions have a long history which worked as judicial institutions that adjudicated the cases and the issues in the locality under their jurisdiction. The system of the panchayats was provided a constitutional framework by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 making it a part of the process of decentralization of power and responsibility. Decentralization is a system in a federal polity where the powers are distributed to various levels of administrative and legislative authority through a constitutional framework. In India the lowest level of constitutional authority is the panchayats which are provided with the powers and responsibility at the local level. The term Panchayati Raj in India signifies the system of rural local self government. It has been established in all the states of India by the Acts of the state legislatures to build democracy at the grassroots level. It is entrusted with the primary task of rural development. Rajasthan was the first state to establish panchayati raj in 1959. Though most of the states created panchayati raj institutions by mid 1960s, there were differences from one state to another with regard to the number of tiers relative position of samities and parishad, their tenure, composition, functions, finances etc. The subject of Local Government is mentioned in the State List under the Seventh schedule of the Constitution. The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 defines Panchayat as an institution (by whatever name called) of self Government for rural areas. The Act also defines Village as a village specified by the Governor by public notification to be a village for this purpose, and includes a group of villages so specified.

Women form almost half of the human population and play very important part in the family and the society. It is for this reason said that a society is identified by the position and treatment it give to the women. Due to the patriarchal control in the society prevalent in India, women have not been able to get a desired and equal position in the political process in the world's largest democracy. The constitution of India has made provisions for reservation of seats in the panchayati raj institutions for women, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities. Women are mostly engaged in domestic works and do not have equal participation in political activities and decision making process. Political participation of women in Panchayati raj

institutions can significantly contribute to the sense of empowerment of women by making them aware and conscious about their rights and their role in the political process. Committee recommendations also highlighted the importance of the critical role of women in Panchayats. The Balwant Rai Mehta committee of 1957 was the first committee that recommended co-option of two women representatives in all the three tier Panchayati Raj institutions. This was not implemented by several states and the participation of women and their empowerment could not be materialized even in a procedural way. Till the 1970s there were no major political engagements by women organizations in India. Women organizations started becoming vocal and active about socio economic issues concerning women and pushed for reservations in Panchayati raj Institutions from 1970s.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill of 1992 was a landmark achievement in the democratic history of India which provided constitutional status to the panchayati raj institution and a direct method of election by the concerned state election commission. It was a very significant step towards democratic decentralization of power and authority that provided 29 subjects for the panchayati raj institutions with increased women participation leading to their empowerment. Empowerment of women by political participation is one of the primary objectives of the panchayati raj system in India. It is provided that the panchayati raj system in India will be a three tier uniform structure in all the states of the Indian Union. The representatives to all the three levels of Panchayati raj institutions will be elected directly by the people. The term of office of the representatives of the Panchayati raj institutions shall be of five years. If the state government dissolves before the completion of five year term, fresh elections need to be held within six months of such dissolutions. The panchayat elections of 2001 was the first election based on the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act which saw increased participation of women in all levels of the three tier panchayati raj institutions. *The New Delhi Document on Women Development* (1985) recognized that despite the rapid growth of informal political activities by women, their role in formal political structure has remained unchanged since independence.

Issues in Functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions:

- a. Lack of adequate devolution to the panchayati raj institutions has made the functioning ineffective. The functions, functionaries and funds should be enabled to discharge their constitutionally stipulated functions. It is imperative that the panchayati raj institutions have resources to match the responsibilities entrusted to them.
- b. Excessive control of bureaucracy has placed the panchayats in a position of subordination. The elected representatives of the panchayati raj institutions have to visit the block offices for funds and technical approval.
- c. Over dependence on government funding is another critical issue that curtails effective functioning of the panchayati raj institutions. Panchayats do not raise resources and

instead receive funds from outside. The state government and the offices concerned neither provide adequate funds nor on time.

- d. Creation of parallel bodies on the pretext of speedy implementation and greater accountability is a problem faced by the panchayati raj institutions. Parallel bodies usurp the legitimate space of the panchayati raj institutions and demoralize them by their superior resource endowment.
- e. Poor infrastructure like the lack of adequate and proper office building also makes effective functioning of panchayati raj institutions difficult. The lack of computing facilities in the gram panchayats is another problem faced by the panchayati raj institutions. The lower level representatives are semi literate and lack adequate training.

Role of Women in Panchayats

The Constitution of India makes provision in the panchayati raj institutions for a significant and effective role of women as representatives. The role of women is equally important with that of men in any sphere of human activity. The economic wellbeing, the socialization and education of the children and all other aspects of the family and society are largely dependent on the role of the women. The women representatives of the panchayats can play a very crucial role in the progress of the locality in various fields of activity. Role of women representatives is crucial for the development of the primary education of the locality. They can look into the proper functioning of the primary schools in the locality. The health sector of the locality is also an important area of concern in which the elected women representatives can play a critical role. The dispensaries or the primary health centres in the locality can be looked after by the elected women representatives of the panchayati raj institutions. The maternal health and the health of the children can be properly looked after by these health institutions. The elected women representatives of the panchayati raj institutions are viewed as examples of independence and power by the other women. This has a significant influence on the society and can break the shackles of patriarchal domination in the society. The participation of women in the panchayati raj institutions not only empower the women representatives politically but also provides the society the much needed change of attitude towards the women of the society as a whole. Furthermore the participation of women in the panchayati raj institutions can also contribute to the democratization of the state and society. The democratic principles and the ideals are well served by the participation of women in the panchayati raj institutions. The overall development of the country is very much dependent on the development of the villages where the larger portion of population resides. The panchayats along with the women representatives contribute to the development of the villages in India. It is with this objective, the policy makers made provisions for women in Panchayati raj institutions.

Problems faced by women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions

Participation and effective role of the women representatives are hindered by several factors even after extensive constitutional provisions in favour of women. India is a state with composite

culture, tradition and language characterized by a patriarchal domination in social and public life. The participation of women in political activities have grown significantly by the implementation of the policy of reservation of seats in the panchayati raj institutions but there are various problems faced by the women in panchayati raj institutions.

- a. The dominance of political parties and party politics in the panchayats has increased due to the system of direct elections to the panchayati raj institutions. The women representatives who lack the political party support do not stand a chance to win elections against a candidate backed by a strong political party.
- b. The male members of the family and other members do not provide support to the women to participate in the political activities or contesting elections. Moreover contesting elections in a democracy like India requires a very high expense. The women candidates cannot enter political field by panchayats due lack of resources.
- c. The husbands of the women representatives elected to the panchayats have significant control and influence in the activities and actions of the women representatives. In a certain way the women representatives can be considered as proxies of the male members or husbands in the panchayati raj institutions.
- d. The panchayat secretaries are given extensive powers and the elected representatives are made to rely on the panchayat secretaries. The women representatives are in stuck between the panchayat secretary and the block office.
- e. The women representatives also lack proper training and orientation. Most of the women representatives are semi literate and have very minimum knowledge of the functioning of the panchayati raj institutions. Some of the women representatives are also not properly aware of their functions and role in the panchayati raj institutions.

Suggestions

The panchayati raj institutions are considered as the method for democratic decentralization. These institutions are providing the much needed scope to the women to participate in the democratic process and also to contribute to the overall development of the locality. The paper by its study forwards a few suggestions for the effective functioning of the women representatives of the panchayati raj institutions.

- a. The elected representatives should be provided the position of power rather than the panchayat secretaries in line with the democratic principles. The position of the panchayat secretary should be reviewed
- b. The system of direct funding by the state government should be introduced so that the panchayats do not carry the burden of relying on the block offices for the funding and required resources.

- c. The elections to the panchayats are delayed by the state government for reasons best known to them. System of timely elections to the panchayats should be designed so that the confidence of the people on the panchayats remains intact.

Conclusion

Gender disparities are pervasive in various layers of social existence of women and its effects are spread across various segments of the society. Women are deprived of even the bare human necessities. Women are to fight against all social practices in the society of which they are an integral part. The empowerment of women is necessary so that women can have meaningful contribution towards the society and the family and also improve their own condition. Women empowerment is the transformation of the structure of subordination including changes in the laws, civil codes, property and inheritance rights, control over women's body and labour and the social and legal instructions that endorse male control. Local government can play a very critical and effective role in the democratization of the polity by engaging the local population in the solution of their issues and problems. The general people get a firsthand experience of the electoral system and the democratic tradition of the nation is strengthened by their involvement. The participation of women in panchayati raj institutions led to a sense of empowerment among women representatives. They become politically active and conscious and make positive contribution to the democratic process of the nation. The panchayati raj institutions should be considered equal partners in the political power sharing along with the central government and the state government and should be provided the much needed autonomy in their functioning according to the democratic principles. The effective functions of the panchayati raj institutions depend largely on the political will of the state government and as such the state government should implement the provisions of panchayati raj system with the right spirit so that the ideals and objectives can be achieved.

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