

## **Panchayats and Political Empowerment of women and their problems: Some Evidences**

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N. Mubeen Sultana  
Ph.D Research Scholar (Fulltime),  
Department of Sociology, Queen Mary's College (Autonomous), Chennai 600005 E.Mail:  
Dr.K.Sakthi  
Associate Professor and Research Supervisor,  
Department of Sociology,  
Queen Mary's College (Autonomous), Chennai 600005

### **Abstract**

*The participation of women, who constitute approximately half the population, in Panchayathi Raj institutions has been considered essential for enabling them to participate effectively and independently in democratic and political processes and to influence decision making. It has been recognized as a step towards equal society and a means of realizing the developmental goals for women. Over the years, women's participation in Panchayathi Raj institutions has been marginal because of several socio economic constraints. Women's participation in politics began to assume special position only ever since 1975 when the UN affirmed the era as the women development era and implemented some perseverance for empowerment of women. The Nairobi Conference held in 1985 called on the participating countries to take steps for ensuring women's participation in politics through reservations of 35 per cent seats in all elections. Therefore, this paper examines some evidences of Panchayats and Political Empowerment of women and their problems.*

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**Key words: Political participation, Empowerment of women, Panchayat raj, Reservation,**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The years immediately after independence saw hectic activities that led to the emergence of the era of planned development aimed at the creation of an egalitarian society based on the socialist pattern. The Panchayathi Raj movement was launched to mobilize public opinion to encourage the participation of people in the developmental tasks at grassroots level, and to provide leadership and support to the comprehensive Community Development Programme which was started in 1950 for transforming our tradition bound stagnant rural society into a productive and progressive one. The Panchayati Raj institutions were in fact, considered to be the most effective instruments for realizing the goals of economic betterment and social justice for the least privileged. Therefore, this paper examines the political empowerment of women in local level politics.

### **1.2 The Present status**

Persistent gender inequality and the marginalization of women in all spheres of life is an important issue in economic/social development, particularly in developing countries. The majority of women who live in patriarchal societies in the developing world do not benefit from the fruits of development and social reform to the same degree as men, as they are systematically excluded from full participation by male-governed social and legal institutions, often in the name of culture and tradition. Feminists, political scientists and development personnel have long argued for specific policies that integrate women into economic and social processes, not just on grounds of equity, but because there is significant evidence that women as policy-makers influence public policies differently than men. Unlike men, women encourage more participation

by others and tend to give higher priority to concerns such as social security, health care, water and sanitation, and issues related to children.

Therefore, the comparative to their portion in the population, women are universally understated at all levels of domination. In the recent research indicates that the most important factor that determines women's participation in politics in developing countries is the prevailing social norms concerning women's participation in the public sphere. The literature also indicates that in patriarchal and caste/class based societies, weaker groups are not naturally represented without special measures. Given the low rate of growth of women's participation in politics, feminist activists are calling for more effective measures such as, quotas and reservation, to increase women's representation. Quotas require that women constitute a certain percentage of a candidate list, and reservation, an even stronger measure requires a certain percentage of elected members of a legislative body be women. Both quotas and reservations are aimed at recruiting women to ensure their participation in political decision-making, despite prevailing social/gender norms.

The effectiveness and fairness of "quotas and reservations" have been extensively studied and these policies remain highly controversial. The main arguments in the literature include:

#### **Pros**

- Women's experiences are necessary in political life and in policymaking in order to represent the entire society.
- Quotas and reservation do not discriminate but compensate women for actual barriers that prevent them from pursuing a political career.

#### **Cons**

- Quotas and reservations suggest that politicians are elected because of their gender and not their qualifications and it also gives political parties who embrace quotas for public relation purposes an escape route to avoid addressing controversial gender issues.
- Women do not want to get elected as they have other interests.

In India, one of the primary achievements of the 1990s has been the constitutional amendment of 1993, which reserve one-third of the seats for women in the Panchayat. As a result, nearly 800,000 women have been elected to different levels of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the country. The amendments have been widely acclaimed as having opened up a new legitimate space where women have a voice in political and economic decision-making at the village level. These amendments have given women the authority to deliberate, debate and participate in the process of formulating policy and in the choice and implementation of development programs that impact people's daily lives.

#### **1.3 The present scenario**

The Indian rural local government includes 232,278 village Panchayats, 5905 intermediate Panchayats, and 499 district Panchayats, constructing a total of 2, 38682 at all the three levels. The existing data in reverence of the first post 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Panpchayat elections in the state shows that of the total number of 2.92 Million elected representatives of Panchayats at different levels around one million are women and a large main stream of them are first times. Over, 9.2 lakhs of these women representatives remained elected to the village Panchayats itself. Similarly, of a total number of 2.92 million elected representatives, SC and ST members accounted for 3.65 lakh and 2.50 lakh respectively. The data presented pin the preceding lines is based on the elections held according to 1991 census. The total number of

elected elite of the Panchayats is likely to be marginally higher when elections are held on the basis of the 2001 census data on population.

#### **1.4 Panchayats and Political Empowerment of women**

Women constitute nearly consistently a small minority of those holding elected office, moreover, democratic decentralization would be concentrated worthless without gender-equity is confirmed. The pace of development in any civil society would be slow, if women who constitute about 50 per cent of the population are not enabled to contribute pin the development progression. India with a female population of over 450 million holds a massive reservoir of women power which go beyond the collective total population of the south East Asian Countries.

##### **1.4.1 Political Participation or women**

The participation of women, who constitute closely half the population, in Panchayathi Raj institutions has been reflected important for empowering them to participate efficiently and self-sufficiently in democratic and political progressions and to power decision making. It has been recognized as a step towards equal society and a means of realizing the developmental goals for women. Over the years, women's participation in Panchayathi Raj institutions has been marginal because of several socio economic constraints. Except for Andra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Panjab, where some women members have been elected to village level Panchayathi Raj institutions in respectable numbers in other states, their representation is either non existent or negligible.

However in some states the balance is required to be hit over nomination and cooperation of women members, it has not carried any noticeable impact on women's participation in Panchayathi Raj Bodies. Moreover, the cooperation is done only in communication and not in the essence of receiving women intricate in Panchayat accomplishments. Women's participation in politics started to adopt distinct position only since 1975 when the UN affirmed the decade as the women development decade and implemented some resolutions for empowerment of women. The Nairobi Conference held in 1985 called on the participating countries to take steps for ensuring women's participation in politics through reservations of 35 per cent seats in all elections.

Women's participation in Panchayats had deserved consideration of the committee on the status of women in India, but the concept of statutory all women Panchayats which it suggested have not been very effective. The National perspective plan for women had contended that political power and right of entry to decision making power are serious requisites for women's equivalence in the course of nation building. The committee quoted for women in all rural local self governing bodies at all levels. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the constitution may be regarded as a watershed in the history of the state initiatives in regard to political empowerment of total women. It had indicted a noticeable shift is the approach of the Indian state to wards women. Previously, women were normally observed as substances of development only and this Amendment made women the themes of development, an essential part of the decision making practice.

Women, as expected, continue to be looked at as objects of development. Though, the Amendment offers for reservation not less than one third of the seats for women in all Panchayat bodies. It also provided for reservation of 1/3 of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats at all levels for women including women from the SC's and ST's who also benefits from the provision for reservation of seats formal participation of women in politics has gone up considerably. According to one calculation about eight lakh women have bow been elected to the different tiers of Panchayats and Municipalities.

### 1.6 Effective Participation of women in Panchayat

Panchayat in India are gradually becoming gender sensitive. In several rural areas women are taking active part in Panchayat Proceedings. However, women's participation in Panchayats activities largely depends upon their individual capacities such as educational level, exposure to the outer world, knowledge and understanding of their roles and responsibilities, decision taking capacity, the environment such as family and spouse support, Panchayat members and community supports. Most of the villages are still conservative in their approach that women's role is limited to that of a housewife and her identity lies in being some one's mother, sister, daughter or wife. Women cannot compete with men in certain areas but what they forget is that women were never given a chance to prove their capabilities. It has been observed that women are not allowed to take the decisions in rural areas.

### 1.7 Problems on the Political Empowerment of women

There are many problems on the political empowerment of women, principally gender relation are enormously male-controlled, more so in large states. Women's access to education which is an effective instrument of empowerment is still very restricted. In 1991 census report stated that a large number of zero female literacy women feel diffident and cannot play their roles properly. The bureaucracy in rural area has proved to be gender insensitive. They generally prefer to align themselves with the rural elites. In Tamil Nadu 66 out of the 98 Panchayat Presidents removed by the collectors under women. Total women's organizations particularly poor women's organizations are very weak in most of the states. The high caste people, village influential who are unwilling to hand over power to women are lying in wait. Therefore, women presidents had confronted a lot of problems, harassment and humiliation, even with these restrictions it can safely be said that the increase of women's power in Panchayati Raj is obvious.

### 1.8 Conclusion

Women Panchayat Presidents have carried out various developmental activities in their jurisdiction, they have not carried them out in accordance with the Article 243 G of the constitution which says that Panchayats will prepare plans for economic development and social justice including the scheme of the 11<sup>th</sup> schedule of the constitution. The voluntary sector and state government should focus on capacity building of these elected women Panchayat presidents through conducting training programmes in decentralized manner so that they can perform their role as women Panchayats presidents effectively. In order to make the women participation effective, the elected women representatives should be supported and encouraged by the government, non-government organizations and media in a sustainable manner. Therefore, it could be concluded that the women have started asserting themselves leading to new kind of situation in the society and reservation of seats has assumed them an unparalleled chance and has formed a circumstance for a kind of social revolution without much type and exclamation. Given the socio economic situation and the patriarchal value prevailing in our society political empowerment of women is a different job.

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