

EXPERIENCING CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI
RAJ INSTITUTION OF SAMBHAL DISTRICT

Arti Garg

Assistant Professor, School of Business Management, IFTM University, Moradabad

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Abstract

Constitution of India was amended by way of 73rd amendment in 1992, wherein constitution and establishment of Panchayats was made obligatory. It was the resolve of the Parliament to take democracy to the grassroot level, which climaxed in the carrying out of this amendment. A period of twenty three years has passed since 73rd amendment and the present study was commenced with an exertion to study the contribution of women in Panchayats. The study was conducted in twoblocks of Sambhal district namely (Sambhal and Asmoli block) of Moradabad Division. A total of 50 women respondents out of 147 women respondents from Sambhal and Asmoli block were randomly selected for the study. The tool used for conquering information was an Interview Schedule. The findings exposed that majority of the women elected as Panchayat members were marital, belonged to joint families and were mostly educated. They were mainly housewives before joining politics. Husbands of majority of the women enthused with them and provided complete morale support and stood by them throughout elections. Economic liberation was the main motive in joining politics as specified by majority of them. The women confronted tremendous administrative problems, and had scanty knowledge about working of panchayats. They could not exercise their right of sovereignty of expression as their husbands or other male members did not support them. A proportion more still needs to be done by the Government in training and empowering the women to exercise their authority at all the levels of Panchayati Raj institutions, local NGO's and government organizations need to come accelerative to train women for this role.

Keywords: Women Representation, Political Participation, Rural Leaders, Women Reservation, Panchayat Raj, Leadership

India has a long inheritance of village panchayats. Historically panchayats have played an imperative role in decision making process in rural India. The word "Panch" has its origin in the custom of a five member elected frame running the day to day affairs locally. With the passage of phase and growing population, the administration process became more multifaceted and cumbersome. Village and many of the old age ethnicities and institutions lost their gleam and splendour. The structure and process of Panchayats are equally essential as they bring to bear and authorize role member therein to accomplish. 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 omitted (Nagendra 2006). Indian constitution, which came into effect in the year 1950, clearly states in one of its articles that the state should endeavor to unify village panchayats and endow them with powers and authority as may be requisite for them to function as units of local self-government. State governments had to decide about the exemplification in the panchayats. It was in the year 1992 that 73rd amendment was brought in the constitution of panchayat as the means of decentralization of power at grass root level. It envisaged the emergence of local leadership to resolve the problems at local level.

Leadership plays an imperative role in modeling the socio-economic and political structure of some society. It is through the leaders that the desires and aspirations of the people are encountered. It is the supreme responsibility of every leader to work for the welfare of people. Rural leaders are those who are elected to political situation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). Thus, people of both genders, who are elected as Presidents or associates of Panchayats at village, block or district level, are considered as rural leaders. Leadership in content of PRI's has great prominence as the objective constituting local governance was to encourage leadership according to

developmental needs of rural India. Effective functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions depends primarily on the superiority of leadership available at the grass root levels.

Women have been endowed with several responsibilities, concerned with the household and family circle. However with the implication in development and political policies, the role of decision making is also rested on them. Women, after being marginalized for long are being brought to the fore front through their envelopment in decision-making process. Passage of 73rd amendment in Indian constitution certified this expansion to take place. Through reservation, women got a constitutional way of claiming leadership and an approach to solve women's problem in particular and other issues related to society like elimination of inequality and women empowerment. It has been observed that women aspire to come out of their outmoded roles to generate a new environment for the novel generation but discharging their roles effectually.

According to Tripathi (2005) Constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is one of the most important political innovations of independent India. Leadership, in the context of Panchayati Raj institutions has great prominence, as the objective constituting local governance, was to encourage leadership according to progressive prerequisites of rural India.

Participation of women in Panchayat has been considered indispensable for enabling them to participate effectively and independently. Political process helps them to influence decision making. It has been documented as a step towards equal society and means of realizing the developmental goals of women. In most Panchayati Raj Legislations legislated by different state governments, women were to be co-opted under exceptional category.

Palanithurai (2001), in his study of Tamil Nadu observed that women have come to positions in the local bodies as provisions have been made in the constitution. The outlook of the society towards the women has started fluctuating; they suggest that



women need orientations, sensitizations, capacity building, information and counseling continuously through organizations. The ongoing experiments and experiences suggest that periodical training, orientation and sensitization can benefit women leaders to perform the assigned role in an enhanced way. He argues that the government will respond to the need of these women leaders only when social organizations and groups sustain them.

The depiction of rural regions in PRIs had been enhanced but the role played by women had been scrawny. Women have become an extremely pivotal theme in the process of change in rural areas. Enough confidence in decision making will justly estimate community up gradation and ensure women empowerment bringing them in leading stream of national development.

The basic need for empowerment is to bring them into the notable stream of national development. International concentration has now shifted on these issues as well as on others which are of particular concern to women such as population growth, health and violence against women, access to decision making and sharing of power, women's human rights and contributions in preservation the environment. Though the 73rd Amendment Act has been addressed as an imperative milestone in the constitutional development in creating broader base for participatory democracy and more space for political contribution of women, several studies and research works have pointed out that it did not bring affirmative results to the desired direction.

To understand the effectiveness of their representation and their reason for entering Panchayats, the present study was commenced to study the involvement of women in panchayats. Their roles were studied to recognize how effective and how progressive they have become in turn for decision making at the grass root level. This could be judged by knowing their achievements through participation in community developmental activities and their collaboration with people, their perceptions of changing roles helped in understanding their personalities.

A pilot study was intended with the following objectives:

To accumulate general information about the women Panchayat associates; To examine their involvement and contribution concerning evolving activities of their respective areas; To gather information regarding the visions of women members about social issues.

Material and Methods

The pilot study was conducted in the Sambhal and Asmoli block out of the nine blocks (namely Asmoli, Bahjoi, Baniakhera, Gunnaur, Junawai, Panwasa, Rajpura, Bilari and Sambhal) of Sambhal district to understand the role of women elected representatives in the evolving activities of Panchayati raj system. All the women representatives were selected purposively for the study.

A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared keeping in view the objectives of the present study. A focused group conversation was also conducted with the community people

so as to gather the viewpoints regarding the participation of women in panchayats. The interview schedule comprised of questions concerning the general information of respondents, triumphs and progressive activities carried out by women members, factors that striving and mired their full participation in the process. The data was collected by making several visits and personally by the investigator during the month of July-August 2015.

Results and Discussion

The present study was undertaken to ascertain the role and evolving activities of women in Panchayati Raj institution in Sambhal district. The information obtained was scrutinized and fallouts are discussed under the following categories: General Information about women members; 2. Achievements and progressive activities carried out by women members; 3. Views of women members regarding social issues.

Common Information about members

Women leadership has a pivotal role in the working of Panchayati Raj institution. However, this remains a distant dream. In rural areas, culture and traditions are observed more rigidly. Family as well as caste plays an imperative role in directing the course of life of an individual. Women have been endowed with numerous responsibilities concerned with the household and personal circle. Thus in our study the majority of female candidates who were elected to be Panchayat members are of marital status, that is, 85.71 per cent and 14.28 per cent were widows and spinster and the majority (73.9%) of these women belonged to joint families where as only 26.1 per cent belonged to the nuclear families.

Educational Requirement of the Respondents

Education is the key that opens the door to life which is indispensable for good social character. In present society, capacity to understand the issues and problems facing the community and the ability to communicate one's ideas to others are significant qualities of a leader. Education is one of the resources of acquiring such a capacity. Education for rural women representative has a great significance in view of the fact that they have become adherents of a very important establishment. Table 1 depicts that 42 per cent of women members had received education up to middle class, 8 per cent of women were matriculates and equal number were higher secondary, 28 per cent of the women were postgraduates, whereas only 14% were illiterate. Education develops an insight and helps the functioning of woman as a forerunner. The self-reliance level of illiterate women is generally low in comparison to literate women.

Table 1 - Educational qualification of women members (N=50)

S.No.	Educational qualification	Number	% age
1	Middle	21	42
2	Matric	4	8
3	Hr. secondary	4	8
4	Graduate	-	-
5	Post graduate	14	28
6	Illiterate	7	14

A study piloted by Indian Institute of Social Science (2000) on Panchayati Raj in Haryana, reviewed the progress of hundred



ected women in four districts. The studies revealed that majority of the elected women members including younger women were illiterate when elected. After two years in office, they demanded literary skill and generally felt the requirement of education for their daughters.

Political and Social Status before Joining the Panchayat

Man is a social animal. This saying equally refers to women who are an integral part of any ethnicity. Indian women are bound to follow the traditions and customs of a community. Primarily in rural scenario, women were supposed to perform the social and in some cases economic roles and men were likely to perform the economic and political roles. Women were more often kept away from the political mount. Thirty three percent reservations in local governance made it vital for the rural women to come into political arena. It is observed that poor response of women in PRIs is due to the conservative thinking of the society and family. From the present study it is evident from Table 2 that majority (66%) of the women were house wives, 18 per cent were associates of political parties and only 8 per cent of them were members of cooperative societies and teaching profession equally before joining the Panchayat. As far as contribution of their family is concerned, in Panchayati Raj Institutions, it was very less before they formally joined Panchayats.

Table 2 - Political and social status before joining the Panchayat (N=50)

S.No.	Options	Number	%age
1	Household activities	33	66
2	Member of co-operatives	4	8
3	Member of political parties	9	18
4	Teaching profession	4	8

The outcomes of a study conducted by Ambedkar (2006) is in contrast with the present study which highlights that almost 50 per cent of the women Panchayat leaders belonged to one or the other political party before they joined Panchayat. Only few mentioned that they had no particular political affiliation and contested as independent candidate.

Gowda (1998) also showed that the women leaders had links with one or the other political party as such members were influenced and motivated by their political mentors who were already in politics.

Ambedkar (2000) showed that larger size of partaking of women in Panchayati Raj Institution could take place because of reservation of seats for the women candidates.

Contribution of Family Members in Panchayat Elections

As far as the contribution of the family members in Panchayat elections was concerned, majority (79.3%) of husbands provided them complete moral support and motivated them and stood by them throughout elections. As one of the respondents was of the view if our families did not support us then we wouldn't have reached this platform. They all were of the outlook that their families instilled confidence in them and boosted their morale. While 16% of the women elected representatives were of the view that they were supported by other family members and remaining 4.7% of the women took their own decisions regarding joining Panchayat.

Panda (1996) in her study of village Panchayat in Orissa found that women entered into politics due to obligatory provision of reservations. Most of women were non-political and entered into politics due to encouragement by their family members or pressure from the village community. The important facet of the study was that the women who reluctantly entered into politics showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and perception of their role and responsibility.

Motive for Contesting Elections

Majority (25) of the respondents desired to help people in the society and to work for the enlargement of the concerned village. Eleven respondents mentioned that they were pressurized by family members especially by their husbands and fathers-in-law. Five respondents entered Panchayat to clutch power and to prove their distinctiveness. Political parties driven five respondents and four members mentioned that since there was no other women member available they thus contested elections (Table 3).

Table 3 - Reason for contesting elections

Reason	Frequency
Hold power	5
Help people in society	25
Pressure from family members	11
Pressure from party	5
Non-availability of women representative	4

Panda (1999) study observed that 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 subjective interests.

Autonomy of Speech and Expression

Majority (18) of the respondents had ample freedom of expression in the meetings. They were not found meek or mute; they usually raised their point of view in the Panchayat meetings. Ten respondents expressed that they were not free to put forth their view points.

Gender disparity was found to be the foremost reasons for not entertaining their view points as male members' viewpoints were favored in male headed Panchayats. Another reason was that 22 women respondents felt hesitant to present their views in front of the male members.

Nanda (2006) discovered that in spite of having a constitution and the 73rd amendment act which highlights the equity and equality and social justice, women is immaterial and not into decision making in such bodies/organizations.

Palanithuri (1999) in his study exposed that women members are facing lot of problems in Panchayat and male members do not cooperate with elected women members. The reservation of women in such organization alone will not help them to make decisions unless they become assertive.

Difficulties Confronted by Women Panchs

Out of the total respondents, eighteen stated that they confronted problems from other members due to their self-motive; Panchayat members were exclusively guided by their personal interest, whereas eleven respondents faced interference



from their male colleagues in all works. An equal number of women representatives thus felt hurt for not having been heard or supported even when they presented befitting and relevant arguments. Six respondents even faced abusive language from the male counterparts when they place their views for the development purpose of the area. Four respondents revealed that even the female colleagues did not support her (Table 4).

According to Farza Bari (2005) 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 negligible in political decision making bodies.

Table 4 - Difficulties confronted by women members (N=50)

Problems	Frequency
Abusive language	6
Self-motive of selected members	18
Interference	11
Lack of support from male members	11
Lack of support from female members	4

Means to Overcome Constraints

Women members adopted abundant methods to overcome constraints. An average number (14) of respondents reported that they enthused with the Panchayat members to inculcate the interest for a positive approach in the overall interests of the area. Twenty of the respondents actively participated in the village discussion to know more about the problems. Seven respondents reported that they built confidence among themselves to face such situations and dispose of matters, even differences in a positive manner. Five respondents exposed that they regularly attended the meetings to keep themselves updated and four respondents opined that they avoided such situations because it was not at all futile exercise to push the matter any further (Table 5).

Table 5 - Means to overcome constraints (N=50)

To overcome constraints	Frequency
Regularly attended meetings to keep themselves update	5
Participated in discussion at village level	20
Building confidence	7
By motivating Panchayat members	14
Avoid situation	4

Factors that Persuade Women to Take Part in Panchayat

The factors economic independence, commitment to service, transparency in PRIs and administration, support from government officials were responsible for an equal number (9) of respondents to take part in Panchayat. Seven each of the respondents opined that family encouragement and communication skills were the encouraging factors that stimulated them to take active part in Panchayat (Table 6).

Table 6 - Factors that persuade women to take part in Panchayats*

S. No.	Factors	Frequency
1	Economic independence	9
2	Family encouragement	7
3	Commitment to service	9
4	Transparency	9
5	Support	9
6	Communication skills	7

* Multiple responses

Outlook of Women Regarding Social Issues

With change in social conditions, Women's opinions on social issues have changed. They opposed dowry system, child marriage and purdah system. Gender discrimination was equally resented by women as they felt that nation's population comprises of equal number of men and women. Some disputes like family planning, literacy, alcohol, drugs were becoming the major emphasis in developmental activities.

They were ardent to remove the social evils which exist in our society, but had not yet taken any demanding steps towards the removal of this stigma from the society because the women of these villages were totally ignorant and were not cognizant of the rights conferred upon them by law.

Conclusion

The implementation of 33% reservation for women at the grass root level has opened up new prospects for women's entry to Indian politics. In post- 1993 phase, a large number of women entered in PRIs as elected representatives. However, it has been felt that even after getting 33% reservation, women are still fronting lots of impediments which put obstructions on their participation. Though there are no constitutional obstacles for women's political participation at grass root level or any level of administration, in reality, various structural, functional, attitudinal and environmental constraints still exist which do not provide conducive environment for women's participation in PRIs.

The present study exposes that apart from 33% reservation for women provided by 73rd Amendment Act, some other factors like education, marital status, family structure, political affiliation of family, party affiliation of members, support of party, have played an imperative role with regard to women's participation.

As far as the contribution of the family members in Panchayat elections was concerned, majority of husbands followed by sons and daughters too provided women representatives full moral support and motivated them and stood by them throughout elections.

Regarding motives for contesting elections the study discovered that majority of the respondents wished to help people in the society and to work for the development of the concerned village. Few respondents were coerced by family members especially their husbands and fathers-in law to contest elections.

It was also found through the study that majority of the respondents had complete freedom of expression in the meetings. They were not found meek or mute; they usually raised their point of view in the Panchayat meetings. However few respondents expressed that they were not free to put forth their view points. Gender disparity was found to be the



foremost explanations for not entertaining their view points as male members' viewpoints were preferred in male headed Panchayats.

Respondents also stated that they faced problems from other members due to their self-motive; Panchayat members were entirely guided by their personal interest. Women also faced interference from their male counterparts in all works. Women representatives thus felt hurt for not having been heard or supported even when they presented appropriate and relevant arguments. Six respondents even faced abusive language from the male counterparts when they place their views for the development purpose of the area.

Women members adopted numerous methods to overcome constraints. Women reported that they motivated the Panchayat members to inculcate the interest for a positive approach in the overall interests of the area. Few participated actively in the village discussion to know more about the problems. Some respondents reported that they built confidence among themselves to face such situations and dispose of matters, even differences in a positive manner. Whereas respondents also opined that they avoided such situations because it was not at all futile exercise to push the matter any further.

The factors economic independence, commitment to service, transparency in PRIs and administration, support from government officials were responsible for majority of respondents to take part in Panchayat. Further, family encouragement and communication skills were also the motivating factors that encouraged them to take active part in Panchayat.

These elected women want to make others aware of their rights and are working to remove the evils of the society like dowry system, purdah system, illiteracy etc.

It can thus be concluded from the study that influence of family members thus assumes more reputation. This leaves an impression that our socio-economic and political structure is such that it leaves little space for the women members to be in domineering presence. It has been found that majority of the women members are prompted by their husbands to contest in election. The study reflects that men still play a proxy role through the female representation in PRIs. This shows that real empowerment of women as desired by 73rd Amendment Act through PRIs is still a far cry.

Recommendations

1. Passable changes to be brought by the governmental authorities in the Panchayat affairs and Panchayati Raj Act.
2. Effective steps should be taken to educate the women about Panchayati Raj Institutions, so that these women do not face any delinquent.

3. Some private agencies like- NGOs should be involved by the government to train these elected women; these agencies can mend their communication skills.
4. They have to provide special training so that these women can perform their duties well without facing any sort of impediment in their work to make these women representatives more strong.
5. The Mahila Mandals in the village can be effectively used as mechanisms to mobilize them for this purpose. Some successful women's organizations can also act as catalytic agents for encouraging the women's participation in social and political activities.
6. Wherever necessary, advisory committees can be constituted to guide and monitor the progress made in each village.

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