



Impact of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act on Women Empowerment at the Grassroot Level

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ABSTRACT: Panchayats have been the backbone of grass-root democracy in the Indian villages since its beginning. 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 introduced the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to ensure people's participation in rural reconstruction in general and that of women in particular.

Provisions for women in the 73rd amendment act:

1. The Act provides for the reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women (including the number of seats reserved for the SCs and STs).
2. Further not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women. This would be rotated among different Panchayats at each level.

KEYWORDS: panchayats, grass-root democracy, reservation, SCs, STs, amendment, villages, backbone

I. INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment through 73rd Amendment Act: Women's experience of being involved with the PRI has transformed many of them. They have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials & most of all, by challenging men. They have become articulate & conscious of their power.¹

1. Political empowerment: The Act provides for the reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women. It is an attempt to ensure greater participation of women in election process directly and indirectly. It would be the nursery of creating women politicians for national politics. Even the participation of common women citizens in various activities such as attending Gram Sabha meeting, etc. has reportedly increased (68-78 percent).
2. Economic empowerment: Women are actively participating in rural development as per their capacity right from labourers to policy-makers. This empowers them economically and helps them in being independent.²
3. Decision-making: The participation of women as elected as well as non-elected members is rising due to reservation for women. It acts as a pull factor for women to participate in meetings. They give their suggestions for various works and problems faced by them. This empowers them and enables them to take decisions in different spheres of life.³
4. Raise in voice: Despite their low-literacy level, they have been able to tackle the political & bureaucratic system successfully. They have used their elected authority to address critical issues such as education, drinking water facilities, family planning facilities, hygiene & health, quality of healthcare & village development.
5. Empowerment of other women: Women are acting as an agent of change in the society and raising voice against injustice and atrocities. Women's role has led to a raise in voice by women against domestic violence and other atrocities. Women are being empowered to active participation and awareness of women about their rights and power.⁴
6. Reduction in violence against women: Domestic violence has substantially declined due to women pradhan or sarpanch. These women representatives take pro-actively take up such violence. The victims also feel free to share their grievances with women representatives.

Some issues in women representation in PRIs



1. Illiteracy and low education levels of the majority of the women elected to the PR's.
2. Women are overburdened with family responsibilities.
3. Introversion due to the lack of communication skills.⁵
4. Poor socio-economic background with which the women have come into the system and poor capacity building.
5. Male family members and also leaders from the caste group/community come in the way of the affairs of the Panchayats.
6. Indifferent attitude and behaviour of officials working in the system.
7. Misguidance by the local bureaucracy.⁶
8. Mounting pressure from the political party which has vested interests in the gender reservation for positions in the PRI system.
9. Undue interference by the husband (post sarpanch) of women representatives, treating them as mere dummies.
10. Widespread use of corrupt practices among the male members and local bureaucrats.

With the establishment of PRIs in our country a woman gets an opportunity to prove her worth as a good administrator, decision-maker or a good leader. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a milestone in this regard. It provides women a chance to come forward. Government should encourage research and development in effective implementation of provisions of 73rd amendment.⁷

In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. In fact the status, employment and work performed by women in society is the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social, economic or political progress of a country will be stagnated. The fact is that most of the women's domestic role is combined with economic activities and utilization of their skill and labour to earn extra income for the family, which makes the family to lead a decent life. Women are regarded as the "better half" of the society and at par with the men.⁸ Efforts are being made to realize that women are real "better half" in men's life. They share abundant responsibility and perform a wide spectrum of duties in running the family, handling the house hold activities like rearing, feeding, attending to farm labour, tending domestic animals and the like, and the most important role now women need to perform more responsibly is her active participation in politics. Political empowerment of women should be one of her prime priorities and the governments and the society must contribute steps in that way to make women participate in the political arena. For that, participation in local self- governments provides initial steps as they are closer to the rural folk. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional⁹ Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. Panchayati Raj Institutions that work as grass-root units of decentralized democratic self-government have been considered as an instrument of socio-economic transformation in rural India. At the local level the 73rd Constitutional Amendment act of 1992 has made two important provisions for the involvement of women in decision making and preparation of plan for development¹⁰. This Amendment has made a provision that at least one-third of women would be members and chair persons of Panchayats. Involvement of people at the grass-roots level is the most important means of bringing about socio-economic development. Decentralization of power to the Panchayati is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision-making process. Local governments being closer to the people can be more responsive to local needs and can make better use of resources. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, to achieve this objective, a system of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayati Raj has been introduced in India.¹¹

II.DISCUSSION

Panchayati Raj was easily accepted because it meant administration by mutual consultation, consent and consensus. It fitted closely into the ancient cultural patterns in India. The adoption of the 73rd amendment by the Parliament in 1992 had a



great revolutionary potential to create genuine democracy at the grassroots village level. It represented a historic opportunity to change the face of rural India. The amendment mandates that resources, responsibility and decision making power be devolved from central Government to rural grassroots people through Panchayati Raj Institutions. Their main objective was to realize Mahatma Gandhi's dream of reaching power to the people through Panchayats. Philosophically, Panchayati Raj is a multidimensional idea. It has its pluralistic definitions and wider connotations in the writings of different thinkers. Emphasizing the ideology of Panchayati Raj Gandhi viewed, "India lives in her village. Independence must begin at the bottom, thus making every village a republic or Panchayati, enjoying full powers". He particularly envisaged and envisioned the concept of Gram Swaraj along with Poorna Swaraj.¹²

Gandhiji had aptly remarked that independence must begin at the bottom. And it is to emphasise that women's empowerment should also start from the villages, the grass-root level units.

Political Empowerment of Women:

Empowerment of women in all spheres and in particular the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the goals of equality, development and peace. The Indian democracy which is more than half a century old has entered the next century. But a large mass of women are kept out of political arena still. There can be no true democracy, or no true people's participation in governance and development without equal and proportional participation of men and women at different levels of decision making. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women. A general acuity in societies around the world is that women's major role is to cook food, take care of the children and the household. Different societies have different social norms and values. In some societies both men and women are assigned specific roles and duties. In most of developing countries, only the reproductive role of women is recognized. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for women to participate in the public sphere of life. Cultural factors therefore offer constraint to women participation in politics. Institutional factors may also impact women's political participation.¹³ Electoral system with more seats per district and proportional formula for allocating seats can enhance women's participation. Quota system is another important institutional device that can guarantee a minimum number of women seats-holders in legislature. Women are changing the governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in an unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the constitution that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments or Panchayati Raj Institution System (PRI). The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in one village, or a larger area such as 100 villages¹⁴ or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994, and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of the government. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. The percentages of women at various levels of political activity have shifted dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from 4-5 percent before to 25-40 percent after. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience in the governance of civic society. In this way they are making the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.¹⁵

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of the country, directly or through the freely chosen representatives. A proper representation of women in political affairs will ensure their views and needs reflected in public policies that affect their lives most. Political empowerment can be defined 'as the capacity to influence decision making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system'. It implies political participation which includes right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment'. Political 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. Political empowerment denotes a distinct role for women in the formation of policies and influencing decision-making process by integrating them into the political system. Indian women have had little representation in institutional politics since independence. There was more concern in the last two decades towards increasing women's participation in political institutions thereby leading to empowerment. Affirmative action has been accepted as a means to political empowerment. Leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance.¹⁶



Women and Panchayati Raj:

Political Empowerment of women starts with the active participation of women in political institutions. The grass-root level democracy entails due importance to initial participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Even though in today's political system where some reservations have been provided to women in local bodies, that has been misused by some i.e. women have been used as rubber-stamps. Actual decision are being taken by their male family members.¹⁷ Women may have stormed the male bastion under the Panchayati Raj system, but in many cases it is the husbands or male members of their families calling their shots. Elected women representatives have reportedly been reduced to proxies of their male relatives. Such system of de facto rule by male counterparts have to be checked and due importance has to be given to women in PRIs. Political system and decision making process is seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution.¹⁸ The objective of bringing improvement in the socio-economic condition of women could be successful only by taking suitable initiatives and measures for empowering them. Empowerment of women will not be possible unless they are provided proper representation in the political system. This objective should be achieved at desired level through making the provision of linking and associating maximum number of women in political affairs even at the lowest level of political activity. In recently introduced Panchayati Raj Institutions, the policy for reservation in favour of women has therefore, been thought as an important approach to maximize their participation in the local level.¹⁹

Political system and decision making process in the activities of rural area.

Under the 73rd amendment of constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution, one third of the total seats for scheduled caste, backward class, scheduled tribes and general caste women members in Grampradhan of village Panchayat, Block Panchayat, District Panchayat are reserved for women candidate. Conceptually, providing representation to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions could be accepted as an important planning approach regarding minimizing the traditional felling of people about the status of women in our society, particularly in terms of keeping women under the subjugation of men, imposing restrictions by the households and society against them in the availing of certain opportunities and several other social, cultural and traditional bindings disfavours them for improving personal life style and status in existing social and economic setting. Consequently this newly introduced policy would enhance the possibilities of increasing equalities in the process of socio-economic development, participation in different activities in mutual understandings, status and role to play in the house hold and the activities performed outside households and different decision making processes of the family among men and women. Factors such as the attitude and intention of elected women towards the initiation of various development programmes and capacity in making efforts in linking different segments of village population with the introduced programmes also matter very much in improving the status of women representatives in the social environment of the village Panchayats. As a consequence this process would lead to increase and strength of empowerment of women.²⁰

III.RESULTS

With the establishment of PRIs in our country a woman gets an opportunity to prove her worth as a good administrator, decision-maker or a good leader. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a milestone in this regard. It provides women a chance to come forward. This experiment is proving to be a big success particularly by providing opportunity to women to come out of their houses and participate in administrative and political field. It has to be considered that the inclusion of well qualified women in village Panchayati at the initial state of the interlocation of Panchayati Raj Institution in rural areas would be an important instrumental measure in planning for improving social status and empowering women. Women constitute half of the population of our country.²¹ It is our duty to encourage the women in such a largest democracy of the world. To give a proper status to the women, Government, NGOs, and Universities have to play a vital role in this field. This group of women, if provided representation at village Panchayati level can strongly rise and handle the issues related to the betterment of women, can play dominant role in decision making process and make suitable recommendation for improving the status of women in the meeting. It creates opportunities for women to exercise more control over design and provisions of services and the management of resources it may benefit. Good number of women competing with the men in local politics, forwarding gender related agendas is looked as a way towards the gender equity.²²

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has recently given its approval for restructuring Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA).

The restructured scheme will have the following components:



The program would apply to all Indian states and union territories, as well as rural local government entities in non-Part IX regions where Panchayats do not exist.

The program will feature a central component – National level activities such as the “National Plan of Technical Assistance”, “Mission Mode Project on e-Panchayat”, and “Incentivization of Panchayats”, as well as a State Component – Panchayati Raj Institution (PRIs) Capacity Building”.

The Government of India will completely fund the central component. However, for all states except the North East and the hill states, the Centre: State financing structure for the state component will be 60:40, with a 90:10 allocation for the North East and the hill states. The Central share will be 100% for all Union Territories (UTs) (with and without legislatures).²³

The scheme’s implementation and monitoring would be mostly linked with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a focus on Panchayats designated under Mission Antyodaya and 115 Aspirational Districts selected by NITI Aayog.

The Scheme will bring together capacity-building programs from other ministries, with a special focus on ministries that will be significantly impacted by the Scheme.

Impact on women with restructured Panchayati Raj Institutions

The said scheme of RGSA will give its major attention to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). It will help lakhs of PRIs to strengthen governance capacities to achieve the SDGs via inclusive local government and the most efficient use of available resources. PRIs achieving SDG goals will ultimately help to achieve gender equality, education, hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, etc.

The scheme will help represent Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women as panchayats which will help women become politically powerful. Also, this scheme will help in strengthening panchayats, and gram sabhas would be strengthened to operate as effective institutions that promote the social inclusion of people, particularly disadvantaged groups, under the plan. It will provide an institutional structure with appropriate human resources and ²⁴ infrastructure for PRI capacity building at the national, state, and district levels. All these developments in PRIs will ultimately make women stronger. As the main focus of this scheme is on women and development then, the say of women’s words will be considered.

IV.CONCLUSION

Women’s political empowerment can begin with PRIs, since their confidence and grasp of the polity will enable them to vote in elections to state legislatures and Parliament, opening the route from “Panchayat to Parliament”. They can even get the confidence to take a stand for themselves, but it is only the start of a journey toward empowerment. Women’s empowerment requires more than local reservations and women’s involvement in Panchayati Raj institutions because the mindset that women are meant for households has still not changed, women are still not educated. Still, women are oppressed and are denied their rights and they face many more hurdles. But the PRIs are great initiatives to make women strong either politically, economically, or socially.²⁵

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