

Political Empowerment of Women through Panchayati Raj Institutions in India

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Abstract:

Participation of women in the political field and in various decision-making bodies is an important tool for empowerment. The participation of women at all levels of governance structures is the highest need of this hour for women's actual empowerment. Women's political empowerment, usually viewed as political involvement in government or elections which is essential to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives. Political participation of women in India has been neglected even since independence. Political system and decision making process in seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution. 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. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 gave them not less than one-third reservations in the PRIs at all the levels. This has been enhanced to 50 percent in some of the states in the recent years. Women's participation has been increasing rapidly but it is not satisfactory. This paper examines the political empowerment of Women with special reference to Panchayati Raj Institutions in India and analyses the reasons for women's low level of participation and make suggestions for their effective participation of women at grassroots level in India.

Keywords: Political Participation, Empowerment, 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Reservations, Women's Representation.

A. Introduction:

The concept of empowerment flows from the power. It is vesting where it does not exist or exist inadequately. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in development activities. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important. Empowerment occurs within sociological, psychological, economic spheres and at various levels, such as individual, group, and community and challenges our assumptions about the status quo, asymmetrical power relationships and social dynamics. Empowerment by means of education, literacy or modest income-generating projects is clearly insufficient to ameliorate the prospects for a higher quality of life for women. The process of empowerment is taking place at so many levels that it is quite difficult to gauge the actual nature and extent of empowerment in improving status of women. Certainly the process is entangled in the struggles of civil society against the state, and under the weight of historical practice and ongoing debates over the appropriate role of ideologies. According to World Bank (2008) empowerment is increasing the capacity of individual or groups to make choices and to transform those choices in to desired actions and outcomes. Women empowerment could be defined as that gives them control of power and resources and change women's lives over time through their active

participation. Participation of women in the political field and in various decision-making bodies is an important tool for empowerment. The participation of women at all levels of governance structures is the highest need of this hour for women's actual empowerment.

B. Political Empowerment of Women:

Women's political empowerment, usually viewed as political involvement in government or elections which is essential to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives. Economic, social and political empowerments of women are jointly reinforcing. Economic empowerment implies that women have the power to make their own decisions and leading to prosperity for families and the society in which they live in. Social empowerment often liberates women from exploitation and mistreatment that curb women from reaching their potential at the fullest. Economic empowerment can provide women to be empowered politically. Political empowerment allows women to take control of the policies that will benefit their economic standing. Social empowerment further strengthens women to participate economically and politically, which in turn reinforces women's standing in society. To be fully empowered, women have to take power for themselves. Women's business associations are one such example of women to empower themselves. By networking and communicating to build better businesses, women gain economic empowerment. When women have both economic and political power, they become full members of society and can have a louder voice when advocating policies.

C. Political Participation of Women in India:

Political participation of women in India has been neglected even since independence. Though our country has adopted democratic system of government and the women constitute 48.9 per cent of population of the country, but their political participation is very low. Due to various constraints they could not occupy the positions of power and assume leadership roles. Women's participation has been increasing rapidly but it is not satisfactory. They are also denying opportunities to participate in the administration, even in the making of decisions that affect their life and welfare. Though Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi had believed that women had a positive role to play in the reconstruction of society and the recognition of their equality was an essential step to bring about social justice. This added to the massive participation by the women in the freedom movement and had a direct impact on the political and social elite, including women. After independence, when the constitution was adopted women like Smt. Sarojini Naidu, Hansa Mehta, Renuka Roy, Durgabai Desmukh etc. took part in the constitution-making. In our Constitution there is guarantee of equality and dignity of the individual and it claimed the fundamental rights of women to political and legal equality and guaranteed non-discrimination in employment and office under the states. Our Constitution had provided many channels for the development and progress of the women. The preambles of the Constitution, the chapters of Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of the State Policies etc., are the specific objectives of this purpose. These constitutional provisions are meant to empower 48.9 per cent women population in India. Many government and non-government agencies are working for the development of women but in practice we find a wide gap between the stated social objectives and achievements, between the legal framework and empirical realities, between the symbolism and actuality. And this is the reason that after these constitutional safeguards and legal frameworks, the participation is still very low.

There are three indicators to assess the political participation of women.

1. Participation in the political process as the voters and candidates in election.
2. Political attitudes such as awareness commitment and involvement in politics and autonomy in political action and behaviour.
3. Their impact on the political process.

D. Constitutional Provisions and Policies for Women:

Before coming to the real picture of women's participation in the Panchayat activities, it is essential to have a focus on the constitutional provisions which have been provided them for their development. Immediately after the framing of the Indian Constitution, certain provisions have been made in the Constitution in order to make them equal with their

male counterparts. The Preamble of Indian Constitution recognizes the principles of social, economic and political justice to all its citizens and also equality of status and of opportunity and to promote among them all. The Fundamental Rights as guaranteed by the Constitution (Part III, Articles 12-35) tries to remove inequalities which Indian women had suffered a lot. In this regard, Article 14 promises equality before the law and equal protection by the laws. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race caste, sex or place of birth and also provides that the state may make special provisions for women and children. Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in public employment. Article 23 prohibits traffic in human beings as well as forced labor. Besides these important provisions in the Fundamental Rights, some guidelines are also given in the Directive Principles of State Policy (Part-IV, Articles. 36-51) which are non-justiciable. Article 51(e) (Fundamental Duties, Part IVA 42nd Amendment Act, 1976) directs the state to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

Despite all such constitutional provisions, there is no satisfactory development in their social status. Because they are not yet behaving as active citizens and now they are living in a very parochial traditional culture. In order to study the political behavior of women, an attempt has been made to study their electoral behavior which is the only indices of the political behavior of women as a whole.

The Panchayati Raj System was initiated to institutionalize the participation of rural people from all sections in local governance. The architects of panchayati raj envisaged that not only men but also rural women should participate in their development. The Balwantrai Mehta study team was conscious about the representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). It therefore recommended co-option and nomination of women in Gram Panchayats (GPs) and Panchayati Samitis (P.S.). Accordingly, different States attempt to provide representation to rural women. Some states (like Maharashtra) chose nomination whereas some (like Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana) adopted co-option. On the other hand some States (like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Bihar) gave up the representation to women in PRIs.

Despite these efforts, because of our male dominated rural society, presence of women in PRIs remained negligible as shown by various studies in different areas D'Lima, 1983 (Maharashtra), Manikyamba 1990 (Andhra Pradesh), Bhargava and Raphael, 1994 (Karnataka), Singh, 1993 (Gujarat). Women could not play a significant role in PRIs. Provisions of nomination/ co-option of women into PRIs became a patronage of socio-politically dominated rural elites, instead of leading them to meaningful participation.

E. Women's Representation in Panchayat before 73rd Amendment Act

Andhra Pradesh Mandal Praja Parishad, Zilla Praja Parishad and Zilla Abhivrudhi Sameeksha Mandal Act, 1986 had a provision of reservation of maximum of four seats for women in Gram Panchayat and some percentage in Mandal Praja Parishad and Zilla Praja Parishad. Some percentage of the posts of chairperson of the ZP were also reserved for women. Himachal Pradesh Panchayat Act also had a provision of 25 per cent reservation for women. The Kamataka Zilla Parishad Taluka Panchayat Samiti, Mandal Panchayat Act 1983 had a provision of reservation of 25 per cent of seats for women at ZP and Mandal Panchayat levels. One seat each in Mandal Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat was also reserved for SC/ST women. Kerala Panchayat Act had provided 30 per cent reservation to women in Panchayats. Madhya Pradesh Panchayati Raj Adhiniyam 1990 provided 30 per cent reservation for women at village level. 10 percent each in Janpad Panchayat and ZP levels. Among them at least one seat was reserved for SC/ST women. The Maharashtra Panchayat Act had made a provision of 30 per cent reservation for women. Orissa Panchayat Samiti Act 1991 reserved not less than one-third seats for women including SC/ST women. Besides, either chairperson or vice chairperson will be women. West Bengal Panchayat Act also has a provision of not less than one-third seats for women at different tiers of the Panchayat. The Panchayat Acts of the rest of the states had provided berth for women either through co-option or nomination.

The Constitution of India is based on the principles of equality. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth. It envisages political equality for men and women but no concrete step was taken by the government before 1993. With the introduction of reservation or quota system in the Panchayat Raj institutions a great beginning has been made in the direction of legislative empowerment of women and it is hoped that along with women's empowerment through collective voicing and participation in the development stream, it should go a long way in the real empowerment of women.

F. Scenario after 73rd Amendment:

It is the Constitutional 73rd Amendment Act, which seems to have provided some real basis for bringing women into the power structure at the base i.e. the Panchayat level. While reserving one-third seats for the Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes in the Panchayat area, one-third of such seats shall be specifically reserved for women belonging to SC/ST sections, provide the Act as per Article 243D(2) Article 243D(3) provides that not less than one-third (including the women's SC/ST seats) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats

may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. Further, the Act provides for reservation of SC/ST and women, in the offices of Chairpersons of the Panchayats at the village or any other level. The intentions of the Act are thus clear. Power has to devolve to the people at the grassroots, and specific provisions have been made for those sections which have suffered through centuries of stark exploitation by being kept out of power and depriving them of education, property and power i.e. the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. The Act enables thousands of SC/ST women candidates to take power in their own hands and use it for the betterment of their condition.

G. Opportunities:

It is frankly recognized that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has opened up vistas of opportunities for women to prove their significant role in the development process. The fact that women are present in PRIs itself is an enabling factor for women. And that women are present in PRIs in a particular percentage is even more enabling. However, the scope for opportunities does not limit itself to reservations alone. Against this backdrop, some of the opportunities have been identified.

They are

1. Thirty three per cent reservations in panchayats.
2. To participate in national level discussions/events.
3. To raise women's issues in panchayat - like lack of access to water, health, electricity.
4. Opportunities to take up issues specific to women and children.
5. To take decisions in development of panchayats
6. Opportunities provided by gram sabhas - an occasion for large number of women to participate and raise their concerns.
7. Establish a relationship between public and women representatives.
8. Opportunity in proper identification of BPL families.
9. Creation of women SHGs through women panchayat members.
10. Opportunity for women presidents to express their views and ideas.

Through the implementation of 33 per cent reservation in panchayats women have got an opportunity to raise their concerns and opinion in gram Sabha. The opportunity of establishing a relationship with the public (ranked as second) is also considered a big boon to the participants. Thus, the opportunities predominantly relate to raising issues and participating in decision making process. These women can participate in decision-making process for providing basic services to the masses. Nevertheless, women in PRIs still lack the capacity and capability to raise voice on various issues.

In India, affirmative action for women and disadvantaged groups has been enshrined into the

constitution. The Constitution (73rd Amendment Act), enacted in 1992, calls for the reservation of a minimum of one-third of seats for women (both as members and as chairpersons) within all of India's locally elected governance bodies commonly referred to as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). In 2009, the Government of India approved a 50 per cent reservation for women in PRIs; and many states, including Rajasthan and Odisha, have passed similar legislation. The same amendment also calls for PRIs to "prepare and implement plans for economic development and social justice." Women in India are much better represented in the Panchayati Raj Institutions as compared to the Parliament. As per the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, in 2008 the Gram Panchayats had 37.8% women members, the Intermediate Panchayats 37% women members and the District Panchayats 35.3% women members. The total representation of women in all three tiers of the Panchayat amounted to 36.87%. This seems to be a result of Article 243D of the Indian Constitution, mandating at least 1/3rd of the seats in all tiers of the Panchayat. A further Amendment to the Article was proposed in 2009, increasing the reservation to 50%, but was not passed. Some states such as Bihar have 50% reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj as per the State Legislation, but not all the states in India have adopted similar legislations.

On the positive side it has been noticed that due to reservation of seats many women were elected to local bodies. Reservations has created a space for women's need within the structural framework of politics and legitimized women's issue. They have been given the opportunity to share powers with men. Reservation has also recognized the identity of women and their presence in the public life.

On the negative side it has been found that the elected representatives are treated as "puppets" in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Most of them remain silent spectators to the proceedings of the panchayat meetings and rarely participate in the discussions. They hardly voice their own opinion regarding identifying beneficiaries, assigning contracts, locating developmental projects, etc. Simply sitting and listening to proceedings of the meeting have been their form of participation. Active participation in the form of involving in the decision making process, budget preparation, planning etc, was found to be rare in case of women representatives. Due to male dominance elected women members are functioning more or less as dummies – the husband of women Sarpanches are actively participating in the panchayat matters instead of allowing their wives to take part in the decision making process. Financial matters are not tackled by the women representatives and for this they depend upon their husbands or sons or any other male relatives. Most of the elected women Sarpanches are regarded as a mere „Rubber Stamp“ and all the functions of the Panchayat are being performed by their husbands of local elites. Attendance of elected

women Sarpanches are regarded as mere „Rubber Stamps“ and all the functions of the Panchayat are being performed by their husband of local elites. Attendance of elected women representatives in Gram Panchayat Meeting is found very low. Majority of them did not attend the meeting regularly. In spite of reservation of seats for women, the meetings of the Gram Panchayat are overwhelmingly a male dominant event.

Affirmative action to ensure women's political representation is an important step in democratizing and engendering local governance. However, it has not been adequate to ensure women's leadership and their effective participation in local governance, as elected women representatives (EWRs), both members and Sarpanches, continue to face several institutional and social barriers. At the institutional level, the capacity of local governance structures to implement reforms, institutionalize accountability systems, decentralize functions and facilitate women's active engagement plays a role in determining whether women are able to emerge as political agents and actors. Social barriers include lack of education, lack of respect for women in PRIs, physical violence against women in the public and domestic spheres, and oppressive patriarchal and caste structures. Traditional power hierarchies are tilted in favour of men and resist giving space or recognition to women's attempts to be part of the political scenario. Although there are women Sarpanches who have taken the initiative and made remarkable changes on behalf of their constituencies, it is widely acknowledged that generally elected women representatives face many facets of gender discrimination.

In some states their representation, as members has been more than one third. For example, in Andhra Pradesh representation of women has been 33.84% at Gram Panchayat level, 37.01% at Mandal level and 33.21% at Zilla Panchayat level. In Karnataka where reservation for women was in practice before this Amendment, representation of women at Gram Panchayat level was 43.79%, 40.21% at Mandal Panchayat level and 36.45% at Zilla Panchayat level. Similarly, in states like Kerala, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, and Tripura share of women was more than the minimum prescribed in the Central Act.

The representation of women chairpersons does not resemble with their share as members in the Panchayats as in most of the states, they do not have their share more than prescribed. It is interesting to mention here that one each in Tripura and West Bengal, 7 in Madhya Pradesh and 13 in Maharashtra have emerged as All Women Panchayats. It is heartening to note that Kulthikari Panchayat (West Bengal), which was an all women Panchayat in previous term, retained its status as all women Panchayat this time also in the recently held election.

Most of the studies conducted after the passing of 73rd Amendment Act revealed that with the provision of 33 per cent reservation clause, the number of women in Panchayathi Raj bodies has significantly increased. But the dominance of men persists because of patriarchal culture, traditional outlook and low percentage of literacy among women. The women members of Zila parishad and Block Samiti are playing more effective and efficient role than the women representatives of Gram Panchayats. Mostly women members of Zila parishad and Block Samiti belong to political families. They have better understanding of the issues involved in the functioning of Panchayati Raj. On the contrary majority of the women members of Gram Panchayat had no formal schooling, were usually shy and have less interest in the welfare of the villages. Many of them who become members for the first time are accompanied by the male members of the family who perform their duties. In case of woman Sarpanch, it is usually her husband or son who takes decision and performs her role. When elected women representatives meet officials with men of their family, the officials meet the latter and not the former. Even reserved seats are offered to their husbands and other male members of their family. The objective of reserving seats will be lost if this problem is not checked immediately. Further men create hurdles where woman sarpanch is working and join hands to get a vote of no confidence passed against her. The male members have been dominating the functioning of Panchayats and do not allow women to participate effectively. Thus reservation clause which intends to empower women in Panchayati Raj Institutions is being made ineffective by traditional power leaders in rural areas as they get vote of no confidence passed against women and dalit panches. A study of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Madhya Pradesh reveals that still the dominance of men persists. In fact, they are the chief spokesmen where their wives are sarpanch. The main reason for this non-performing role of women is illiteracy and parda system. In Rajasthan, too, because of traditional outlook and feudal values, the participation of majority of women at grassroots level is not encouraging yet some women have shown capabilities in their work. The performance of members of Panchayat Samiti is fairly better. The performance of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Andhra Pradesh is not uniform. They are having poor educational background. Initially, women were hesitant to enter the political arena, political parties took advantage of this situation and proxy rule prevailed. A new class of sarpanch pati also emerged where the husband of the women sarpanch managed the affairs of the panchayat, while women acted only as a rubber stamp. Some of the women representatives feel that male members help them in the functioning of the Panchayati Raj bodies because they are totally ignorant of their role and illiteracy become an obstacle in their functioning. Hence, there is need to train these women Panchayati Raj functionaries about their rights and duties and their role in Panchayati Raj institutions otherwise new entrants will not be able to play an

effective role. Besides training them, there is need to bring attitudinal changes in the society as patriarchal culture is still dominating rural society. They consider women's place is at home only and that they are not fit to perform public roles. The participation of women in PRIs in Andhra Pradesh has resulted in social identities and the development of political awareness. It has created an urge to become a part of mainstream political, economic and social life. In spite of many social and cultural limitations, women have proved better leaders than their male counterparts. Various research studies have been conducted to study the women leadership at panchayat level in different states. The women's representation has been very encouraging in states like West Bengal, Haryana, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. In Kerala and Karnataka, in Gram Panchayat elections, not only 33 per cent but over 43 per cent seats have been captured by women. Even in the state of Orissa a large number of women have come to power at grassroots level. This achievement becomes all the more spectacular when it is seen against the backdrop of low literacy level of women in the state, which is 29.1 per cent only. So the outcome of these studies is of mixed nature.

The studies in different states reflect that women were used as proxies. The proxies suffer from certain characteristics.

1. They display a lower level of political awareness
2. They show their primary loyalty to their family
3. Their role as an elected representative is merely an extension of their role as housewife
4. They serve paternal interests of the family.

In general, elected women are fast making a place in panchayats all over India. The 73rd Amendment Act 1992 has certainly changed the situation of rural women and ensured their adequate representation at different levels of Panchayat Raj institutions. Women have shown remarkable maturity which has closely aligned them with the mainstream. The situation can become better over a period of time with men changing their mind set and accepting women in their new roles.

H. Reasons for Women's Low Level of Participation:

The Internal factors which is affecting the process of women & empowerment and participation are identified as: lack of awareness, experience, knowledge, skills, leadership quality, low level of education, lack of exposure etc. It is noticed that women representatives are not aware of their functions, duties and responsibilities. Lack of education or low level of education has become a major obstacle in the path of playing active role in the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions. The elected members are unable to understand the basic of working of Panchayati Raj Institutions. As a result they provide an ineffective leadership.

The external factors which affect the process of participation and empowerment of women are: influence of family, caste, social outlook, patriarchy etc.

The dominated Indian Society does not perceive women as capable or worthy of leadership. The Indian males still perceive that they are alone capable of occupying positions and holding power. Men representatives also do not help their women counterparts in understanding their role and in playing an active part because men feel that women do not have an understanding of development work to be undertaken by panchayats. Another major problem is that due to pressure of household activities, livestock care and farm work, rural women are not able to give enough time to panchayat activities.

I. Suggestions:

Majority of the women representatives are ignorant of 73rd Amendment Act due to lack of education, awareness. Hence, there is need to train these women about their rights and duties and their role in Panchayati Raj institutions. Besides training them, there is need to bring attitudinal changes in the society as patriarchal culture is still dominating rural society. They consider women's place is at home only and that they are not fit to perform public roles. Skills have to be developed in elements of planning for social and economic development and programme management at the village level.

Women should also be encouraged to organize themselves. The Mahila Mandals in the village can be effectively used as instruments 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. The Government should provide finances and infrastructure to some of the deserving and successful women organizations to take up the responsibility of encouraging the women elected representatives. The leaders of women's movement in the country could also take up this task. They too can provide support to sensitize the rural women. There should be increased emphasis on ensuring the participation of women in the meetings of Panchayats at all the levels. This is needed to promote and enhance their leadership qualities and self-confidence. It will help them to perform better in the Panchayats to ensure their participation in the meetings. Attendance of all women must be made compulsory from Gram Panchayat to Zilla Parishad. Incentives play a vital role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision making. It has been noticed that there are certain very active and enlightened women leaders at all the levels of Panchayats, who have been successfully implementing the developmental schemes and have ensured overall development of their constituencies. Such leaders need to be encouraged by publicizing their leadership qualities and honouring them in public meetings. It will certainly encourage other women representatives and their success stories and good practices will get replicated. The media both print as well as electronic can play an important role in creating awareness in the rural society. It can act as an agent of

political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice.

J. Implication for Intervention

Empowerment of women at the grassroots level has to be cultivated to transform the state of helplessness and passivity of the social structure to a state of hope and action. Unfortunately, neither the Centre nor the state governments have put forward specific legislations to deal with the problems of women at the panchayati raj level and empower them politically. Similarly, the role of NGOs and SHGs has not proved significantly; the constitutional and legal steps are under scrutiny; and gender bias based on a patriarchal notion of sex-role stereotype obstacles the successful performance of elected women representatives in the process of political participation at the village level. The existing problems in the system of panchayati raj should be looked at with recommendations for necessary changes to make women's participation in tune and temper of democratic decentralization and empowerment of rural women. Important steps and measures for this purpose can be attributed through the following interventions which will prove to have far-reaching implications:

1. The basic problems of women at the rural level need to be addressed and resolved because the poor and dalit elected representatives, who depend on daily wage and income, do not show their enthusiasm for attending meetings regularly, and it is true that social and political development at the panchayat level cannot be successful by sacrificing their basic needs. Therefore, it is necessary to compensate them for their loss. If income and social security improved, women would automatically become self-dependent and the pivotal force of elected members in panchayat will reckon.
2. Channelise the welfare and women-centric programmes in a proper, time-bound and result-oriented manner by which the target groups will be the real beneficiary.
3. The panchayati raj institutions in India are running into an acute financial problem. For their economy, they have to depend on the state government. In the absence of fiscal autonomy and shortage of funds they will be unable to implement the plans and programmes successfully. As a result, the credibility of the women's performance comes to question. There is the need of real and substantial areas of revenue generation and reasonable devolution of power for this purpose by the state governments.
4. The state administration should spearhead gender sensitisation, and it would be possible by training its personnel at all levels to view women as important political entities capable of shouldering responsibilities, introduce regular gender sensitive reorientation programmes for the MPs, MLAs, villagers, bureaucrats and office bearers of the panchayat.
5. In the present context, the national and state commissions for women set up by the government

have the mandate only to recommend to the government. They lack the power to take appropriate and effective measures to address the various issues concerning women and to modify or correct the existing policies and schemes formulated by the government towards their development and empowerment. To make the commissions vibrant and successful, they should have power like the National Commission of Minorities and Human Rights Commission.

6. There is the lack of mechanism to monitor and observe the incidence of violence against elected women in rural areas. The establishment of Women's Rights Commission in each district will bridge the gap.
7. One-third reservation for women in all levels of the parties to be introduced through electoral reforms. Apart from this, in the political party hierarchy, there should be efforts to have at least a minimum of 33% women in all levels of decision-making.
8. Highlighting, glorifying and rewarding women in politics who have successfully confronted maladministration and male hegemony. This will be a motivating factor to other women to enter into politics. The state NGOs, SHGs and individual efforts are required to streamline women success.
9. Lack of information, awareness and financial resources make women easy targets of corrupt bureaucrats and politicians. Hence, state funding of the elections will generate a better environment which will promote women who generally have no control over their earnings and form the low-waged or non-waged strata of the society to contest elections and check the politics of 'influence and power'.
10. The present training system and facilities for elected members is totally inadequate. Hence, the state government must immediately. Empowerment of Women in India through Panchayati Raj system allocate adequate resources for conducting capacity-building programmes for the elected women representatives and functionaries of PRIs. The training programme should include topics like roles and responsibilities of women representatives, which should include information about present day functioning of the system, local body elections, and legal competencies of various tiers, set up Panchayat Training Centres for women at least one in each division, strengthen the capacity-building and skill upgradation through crash courses for illiterate women members, and internet access for information, communication and competency.
11. The interaction and cooperation of the bureaucrats at the grassroots level has to be improved and for this purpose the proper arrangement of interactive and training programmes dealing with panchayati raj functionaries will serve the purpose tangibly.
12. Rather than seeking permission for each technical issue, it will be better if a technical manual is prepared giving relevant information on the common types of rural work which can be used by village panchayats without the need to refer their problems to the junior engineers and officials always.
13. NGOs should use existing women's groups as the fora for discussion and create others with several stakeholders to dialogue, mobilise public opinion and network with existing women groups.
14. NGOs to create awareness among women through mass media, right to information and e-governance.
15. Information technologists and social workers should work together imbibing skills from one another.
16. Initiative by the state government to generate dialogue with political parties at state and national levels to address the problem and come out with constructive plans and programmes. This will be possible with the formation of a forum consisting NGOs, social workers, cabinet ministers, feminists, chief ministers and panchayati raj ministers of each state and experts of grassroots democracy.
17. Women's collectives like SHGs and sanghas should do more for encouraging, supporting and facilitating the women's involvement within the panchayats both as a candidate and as an aware citizen.
18. NGOs cannot empower all women with the same tool. There are cracks in the system due to violence, caste and religion. Despite the success stories of women's collectives, NGOs must be aware of these women who fall through the cracks. Because if the NGOs themselves do not attempt to reach out to them, there is no guarantee if the women's collectives, the female elected representative or anyone else will.
19. There should be stringent laws to check the proxy role of the husband or in-laws. Women members should be suspended from their position if found guilty of allowing the family members to take part in decision-making in public places.
20. More stringent laws should be made for those who abuse and assault women representatives on caste and gender lines.
21. Some of the statutory provisions should be amended such as the rotation of reservation of seats for women. The existing laws speaks of rotation of seats and office of chairperson [Art 243D (III and IV)] but for women in the Indian context, a period of five years has proved as a period of learning and only in the second and third terms have women representatives started showing their real performance. Hence, rotation should be only after 15 years. Likewise, one-third reservation [Art 243D (II and III)] is not sufficient for passing the bills and proposals which are gender sensitive and empowerment-oriented. Hence, 50% reservations at the panchayati raj level will enable women to get their issues addressed, passed and implemented in a more effective manner.
22. Apart from the state, NGOs, collective and individual efforts, legal and statutory measures, the need of the hour is to change societal stereotypes, gender bias, patriarchal and feudal mindset of the

people. This requires a revolutionary spread of information and education among men and women and determination for change. The men should shoulder the responsibility for the miserable plight of the women in society and work sincerely for gender equality starting at the grassroots level. Similarly, women should defy the existing odds such as regressive restrictions and the rigid role differentiations based on gender, and should be conscious of their own rights and duties, powers and responsibilities in the framework of panchayati raj.

K. Conclusion:

Women political empowerment, usually viewed as political involvement in government or elections which is essential to give women a voice in the policies that affect their lives. Women representation in PRIs is an important criterion for assessing their role in politics. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has a significant landmark of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India. It provides not less than one-third reservations in the PRIs at all the levels. Through the implementation of 33 per cent reservation in panchayats women have got an opportunity to raise their concerns and opinion in gram Sabha. As a result, women participation has been increasing rapidly but it is not satisfactory. Most of the studies conducted after the passing of 73rd Amendment Act on empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The studies revealed that with the provision of 33 per cent reservation clause, the number of women in Panchayati Raj bodies has significantly increased. But the dominance of men persists because of patriarchal culture, traditional outlook and low percentage of literacy among women. There are many women who have not only remained powerless but have become dummies for other powerful forces. The proportion of such leaders is alarming high. The opportunity created by the policy makers to bring about gender equity in governance has not been completely translated into reality. Women in panchayats constitute the basic buildings of democracy and a means for the reconstruction of India from below. In this context, political participation of women in India through the panchayati raj system has provided them an arena of freedom, progress, confidence, participation and exposure to the outside world. Today, the quest for the woman's role in panchayati raj is noticeable. Women have started asserting themselves leading to new kind of situation in society. Reservation of seats by the constitution has given them an unprecedented opportunity and has created conditions for a sort of social revolution. Yet, in the process of progress, there are impediments, and women are discouraged from seeking political office due to their ignorance, discriminatory attitude and practices by others, family and child care responsibilities, rigid caste structure and the high cost of seeking and holding public office. Their family members have compelled them to take up their roles in the form of proxy incumbents by the rigid boundaries

drawn by the male dominated patriarchal social structure and mindset. The government is also apathetic to the problems of women at the local self-government level. Despite the constraints and criticisms, the socio-economic situation and the patriarchal value prevailing in our society, the full-grown political empowerment of women in India at the grassroots level is a difficult task but not impossible. The centuries old problems that beset women cannot be solved in one-and-half decade; however, the movement has started to revitalize and re-energize women role in the grassroots democracy, and has had some achievements on its hand. The mission of empowerment of women through panchayati raj is not a failure but a transformation and a beginning to reach the higher trajectory. In order to keep the transformation process sustainable, a fresh look should be given by which impediments will be removed to make the mission of women empowerment genuine, effective and result-oriented at the grassroots level.

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