
ROLE OF WOMENPRESIDENT IN PANCHAYAT-INDIA

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ABSTRACTS

The focal discussion of the paper is to highlight the role of Women as Panchayat President in general and their socio-economic statue in the society in particular. Efforts are also made to pay attention to trace out the linkage between the Panchayat Presidents and their family members. The paper also tried to light on the problems faced by them. At the end the paper demands to continuous training on the role and responsibilities to be discharged by them within the framework of the established political system at the grassroots level.

KEY WORDS: Democracy, Women President, Panchayat.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The following are the specific purpose of the study.

1. To study the role of women presidents in panchayats.
2. To examine the problems faced by the women presidents in panchayats
3. To propose suggestions for the successful functioning of democracy in India

Methodology Applied

It is an attempt to analyse theoretically about the role of women in panchayat raj syatem. Earlier analysations were carefully examined and presented in a descriptive form. On the basis of the nature of the problem, the data used in the study were from secondary source only.

History of Political Participation of women in India

Historically speaking, Indian women actively participated along with the man in the struggle for independence and after the struggle for freedom were intensified in the later phase of independence struggle.

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Nation, was instrumental in bringing thousands of women out of their homes to fight in the freedom struggle. He asserted that amelioration in the condition of women was a necessary pre-condition to the regeneration of Indian society.

So he mobilized women into the National movement, apart from working for their emancipation¹ Independence brought with it the opportunities for equality in the social and political spheres, through the instrumentality of the constitution. The early years of independence were years of promise they seemed to herald a comprehensive social and political revolution in the wake of political emancipation. Women remained under represented in the decision making bodies after independence, despite the fact that they were in the part of National movement, as well as various social reform movements.

A democratic political culture depends on the level of representation by all its citizens irrespective of their sex, economic status etc²

The socio-economic background in general and political background in particulars is important determinants of shaping the nature and level of participation of members in political institutions. Education, economic position, age, caste, awareness, political background and experience in bodies other

than political associations are taken as indicators to study the socio-economic and political background of the women in the present context³.

Political status refers to the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in shaping and sharing of power and in the value given by society to the role of women. Political participation is a process in which people try to affect the Government by taking part in the political process.

Political participation involves an active role of the citizen in the political process of the state with the objective to bring about desired changes in the forms of politics and decisions.

Our review of the women's movement and its interaction with political process in India reveals the undercurrent of contradictions that characterize the understanding of women's role in the political process - both among the national leadership and the women's movement.

Recent Trends in Electoral Participation of Women

Ever since our first panchayat election, the physical participation of women has been more than what is anticipated.

The percentage of female participation has been more or less steadily increasing in panchayat elections.

This shows women are getting more and more politicized⁴. Many surveys of the recent elections showed that - women had a mind of their own and exercised their vote's independently⁵.

Our review of the women's movement and its interaction with political process in India reveals the undercurrent of contradictions that characterize the understanding of women's role in the political process - both among the national leadership and the women's movement.

The women's movement began with the notion of women's rights education, to property etc. But it also contained the germ of a desire on the part of women - to play some role in public life. The aspiration soon developed into the debate social work, or women's needs us political action for the country's freedom. The debate often centered round the repercussions on result of interaction between the two.

The supportive role soon gave way to women's determination to play a full role, on terms of equality with men. Bowing to their determination, national leaders admitted them as full partners in the struggle and accepted complete equality in 1934. But the rationale behind this shift was never explicitly articulated or classified with the result of continuing ambivalence with the women's movement and the leadership of the New Nation.

The issue of women's political role in post-independence India has acquired three major dimensions⁶.

First, made possible by the constitutional guarantee of equality, is participation in the decisions making institutions from the grassroots to the national government.

Second dimension is the operationalization of women's rights, economic, social and political, to translate the constitutional promises into reality.

Third dimension is the purpose of women's participation, the nature of the impact that may or wish to make on the political process and the manner in which they wish to achieve their aims.

The constitution of India treats both men and women equal. As per the constitution, women are entitled to equal share in everything. Indian

Government has been taking various steps to empower women, like a special provision in the Indian constitution i.e., reservation for women in New Panchayat Raj system.

According to 73rd constitutional Amendment the article 243 D of under XI schedule describes the duties and responsibilities of women leader. A lot of area development in health, family planning, land management, animal husbandry dairy etc. can be given a new thrust with the people's initiative and active participation as a key element in the whole process of development⁷

Reservation of Seats and Offices and Rotation

Article 243 D of the Constitution relates to reservation and rotation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women in rural Local Bodies.

In the new millennium there is urgent need to move away from the political contract back again to the social contract to produce a community owned government?

Since entire developmental activities are planned and implemented through Panchayat raj system, it is important that the leaders should be effective, dynamic, committed, responsible, accountable, participant, transparent, Initiative, good motivator, and should aware of what is happening around him. She/he should have a clear vision and mission goals to transform the community.

At this juncture it is necessary to evaluate and assess whether the leader possess such leadership qualities?

Is he competent enough to transform the village and villagers and guarantee quality life to them is the prime question in our mind?

Keeping this entire question in mind the present study attempted to answer this question through primary source of data by interviewing village leaders and Villagers and suggesting measures for better nation building.

Empowerment is the process by which the disempowered or powerless people can change their circumstances and begin to have control over their lives⁸. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have a positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in developmental activities. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision-making.

A woman has a right to lead her life with dignity and without humiliation at the hands of her own family or others. She has a right to education and work outside home free from discrimination and harassment. But the entire social and family structure is designed in such a way to put women in subordinate position depriving them of decision making in all vital areas. Many women feel that they have no choice but to tolerate a subordinate role in the family.

The ultimate goal of empowerment of women is based on Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya, the welfare of all through co-operation and trusteeship in the economic sphere, equal participation in the political sphere, and mutual aid in the social sphere, without regard to caste, creed, class or gender. Thus empowerment of women cannot be imposed from above. It must grow from the bottom upwards.

The Panchayati Raj institutions were considered to be the most effective instrument for realizing the goals of economic betterment and social justice for the least privileged. Participation of women (who constitute nearly half of the population) in Panchayati Raj institution has been considered essential for enabling them to participate effectively and independently in democratic and political process and to influence decision making. It has been recognised as a step towards equal society and a means of realizing the development goals for women.

A few surveys have already been undertaken to evaluate the nature and quality of women elected and their contribution to development and women's issues⁹. The findings shows that despite provision of reservation, the women elected representatives simply surrender politics to the male members of their family.

Most of them remain as silent spectators and rarely participate in the proceedings.

The elected women do not yet perceive themselves as empowered and therefore lack the required confidence in asserting themselves.

The community also does not perceive the women as capable or worthy of leadership because to be led by a woman is to have a man's self-respect eroded¹⁰. So instead of tackling the problems, the elected women

representatives at the grass root level started facing a lot of problems due to various reasons such as illiteracy, work load, various restrictions, caste discrimination, interference of higher officials, non-co-operation of police, lack of adequate power, lack of adequate finance etc.

The govt machinery continues to maintain its hold on panchayat bodies which goes against the very purpose of reservation in these institutions. The officials feel that the elected women representatives are in position simply because of the reservation policy.

They assume that the women representatives will accept whatever they advise regarding rural development. So the elected women are treated as mere puppets in the panchayats and remain passive observers to a process in which they should be the key participants.

Lack of financial resources comes in the way of effective functioning. Non-fulfillment of promises make villagers suspect to the capability of their leader Above all the women leaders are always compelled by their men folk to look at issues from the perspective of

Caste So while distributing the benefits to the poor, women leaders are compelled to distribute the benefits on the basis of caste considerations.

Women's participation in the Panchayati Raj system is not up to the mark. The formal reservation for women in Panchayati Raj structure is not a sufficient condition for their effective participation unless and until it is supplemented by measures which help in resolving the socio-economic pressures inhibiting them. It is essential to understand the problems faced by the women representatives while performing their roles and to solve those problems as far as possible¹¹.

Women's education is one of the most important pre-conditions for the silent revolution to be successful. Education exercises a decisive influence on social, economic and political development

Education brings awareness about their rights and duties and makes the women leaders independent and confident enough to handle problems better. The National Perspective Plan (1988-2000) suggested the need for proper training for all women members of panchayats and other bodies to enable them to exercise their authority adequately¹².

Women Empowerment starts right from the family, giving her equal rights in love, care, confidence, education, property and decision making. Their welfare strengthens socio-economic development. Familial responsibility comes in the way of sustained participation of women in the public sphere. Arrangements should be made for child care and other domestic responsibilities. With the active support of family women will be able to sustain their position in the political arena. There is a need to replace the traditional value system which is based on inequality of sexes where the female play a subordinate role, with a new value of joint sharing of both men and women in public and private spheres.

The elected women representatives must be sensitized to women's issues. Panchayat represents the base of governance and gender sensitive policies, proper and timely intervention will affect the incidence of violence against women. Co-operation of police agency must be ensured.

The women leaders should be given real autonomy without excessive governmental control and adequate financial support for effective functioning.

The role of NGO is very much essential. NGOs can provide training for women leaders. They can organize literacy programmers and study circles for political education as well as develop participatory methods of working and thus serve as a practical training Centre for effective political participation by women. They can also provide support to the elected women representatives when they are presenting women's cases in the deliberative bodies.

Media should also play a productive role in enhancing women's active participation in Panchayati Raj institutions. It should give wider coverage to various activities and measures taken by women and should highlight the problems of women. It could portray women's struggles and experiences, help generate values which encourage gender equality and justice and build up a positive image of women participating in public life.

Participation of women in Panchayati Raj system gives them a status in society. It permits contribution of women not only in rural development process but also for their own development. It also gives them opportunity to work in groups, associate with the developing programs, participate in the decision making process and articulate women needs. The effectiveness depends on how the elected women perceive themselves and how they are perceived in turn as participants in the decision-making process.

Empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj institutions is possible through increased awareness of their rights and duties. They have to realize their capabilities and identify themselves as competent persons. Women's qualitative participation at grass root level is absolutely essential for their empowerment. Constitutional provisions are only a necessary step which should be followed by effective measures. It is not a lone struggle but a family and community-supported step towards empowerment of women at grass root level.

Typology of Women Panchayat Presidents

The women leaders, in the process of making themselves as leaders, exhibited a variety. They are six kinds, namely aggressive leaders, capacitated sober leaders, leaders with status quo aspiration, leaders with the aspiration of upward mobility, leaders with a mood of withdrawal and leaders with no idea.

A few cadre parties and a few committed NGOs have been continuously orienting the leaders and extending all their supports to the women leaders who have established their links with the party as party members and NGOs as beneficiary. They always exhibit aggressive character and by which they are able to discharge their duties more effectively than the other leaders.

There is yet another category of leaders, who have been oriented and trained but not committed to any ideology or organization. But they are committed in their work. They have participated in the programmes organized by the NGO but they do not have continuous linkage with NGO. They are capacitated leaders concentrating much on their responsibilities and they have performed very well as they have enhanced their capacity. They have aspiration to continue in public service but no specific position. Whether they win or not in the next election, they will remain in public sphere.

There is another category which is slightly different from the first one. The capacitated leaders have concentrated much on enhancing their capacity continuously and performing their duties. While performing their duties, they see the response of people, bases on which they have a desire to continue in office. But this category has fixed an ambition to continue in the same position and for which this category of leaders have developed an art of managing the people in the local bodies. All their deficiencies are compensated by their public relations. Their linkages with the people are stronger as they are always with the people.

The fourth category leaders have a different aspiration. Though they have a number of deficiencies, by keeping themselves very active in discharging their duties they want to demonstrate to their party leaders. They are always busy in meeting the people and keeping their life busy by familiarizing themselves with the people. They consider the Panchayati institutions as launching pad for their political entry.

Another category of leaders who are unable to meet the challenges of the role and unable to bear the pressure of the society and the family have expressed their desire to withdraw from public life. These leaders were brought to the public life by force by their husbands. The relationship between the husband

and wife has undergone a change in the whole process of administering development through Panchayati Raj Institutions in most of the cases. Many of the husbands realized the fact that their wives have acquired needed capacity and hence they have to withdraw from the support space. But there is another segment of men who have determined not to allow their wives to attend to their duties on their own. Most of the women leaders have expressed that they have been facing problems in the local body institutions because of the interference of their husbands. This factor cannot be explained to their husbands by the women leaders of panchayats on their own.

There is yet another category which has no idea. They are in the hands of the male members of the family despite the pronouncement of the government.

The women leaders have not moved out from their houses for public works. They are not meeting the people. Virtually their husbands are operating the machinery. They are not bothered about it. It is a money spinning device which is ably tackled by their husbands by their muscle and money power. Officials are also co-operating with such leaders. They have no idea about the panchayats and they have no aspiration to contest in the next election. If their husbands ask them to contest they will contest, otherwise, they need not bother about it. It is true that withdrawal symptom is visible among the women leaders in local bodies. They have a volley of problems from the officials; own family members and even their own political party leaders.

Yet majority of the leaders have exhibited their determination to occupy the public space. Having come and tested power the women leaders have come to the stage of enlisting themselves as members of various organizations to fight for their rights and legitimate spaces. In their struggle they have identified the organizations and institutions which are supporting empowerment of women and through them they have determined to continue their struggle. Further they have started forming their own organizations and federating their organization with other states/organizations.

Problems Faced

[After elections, the women leaders have entered into the offices without any orientation. The moment the leaders peeped into the offices, the officials have given orientation to the leaders on 'do's and don'ts' by reading out some of the provisions of the Panchayati Act. This kind of orientation has crippled the initiative of the leaders.

Generally it is a complaint made by 92 per cent of the women panchayat Presidents that the officials are not co-operating with elected leaders by providing necessary information in time to enable them to perform their functions effectively. Further the leaders who are weak in terms of their capacity are being ill-treated and humiliated.

The officials tried their level best to establish their control over the leaders by making use of the ignorance of the leaders.

Managerial skill is an imperative for the leaders to manage the personnel and the resources well within the established frameworks of administration. Here the women leaders lack that capacity. In all for a, they have indicated the problem but yet decisions are not on the sight. Yet another problem they face in local bodies is the lack of communication skill. Further, they need a communication skill to mobilize the people and to manage them in Gram Sabha meetings and other public meetings. Nobody gives such orientation to them in the art of effective communication. By providing this opportunity to women to work in the local bodies as leaders, their workload has been increased enormously both in their houses and offices. Women leaders hailing from upper middle class family have been to some extent relieved of their duties at home as necessary arrangements have been made in the home to look after the affairs which had been looked after by the women leaders before they were elected to positions in local bodies. But women hailing from

poor families are facing a number of problems. Their workload has been increased; panchayats are not paying anything to the leaders as salary even after handing over a variety of responsibilities to them on par with a full time officer. In some of the places we find poor men and women assumed responsibilities and discharged their role and function. Poor laborers cannot afford to lose their daily wage by attending the panchayat works. It is natural on the part of the woman leader who is a wage earner to handover responsibility to someone else and performing her duties to the family.

The practical problems faced by Women leadership

Lack of information

Lack of political orientation and training in administrative skill

Officials' non-commitment and non-cooperation towards women empowerment

People are not recognizing the women services.

People do not have co-operative attitude towards panchayat bodies. When drainage/road facilities provided, the encroachers are not ready to move out from their places of occupation to help the local bodies to perform their functions properly.

Lack of will on the part of the leaders of political parties

Suggestions

Women leaders need continuous training on the role and responsibilities to be discharged by them within the framework of the established political system at the grassroots level. How to administer and development and social justice should be known to everyone to perform their role effectively. Through orientation workshop and training, their capacity could be enhanced. This exercise should not be a onetime affair. It is a continuous process where the women leaders can have an opportunity to meet and interact with other leaders.

Further, leaders cannot perform their roles and duties without adequate information. Now it is a major handicap that leaders are not supplied with needed information for their functioning. Everywhere it is a cry of the leaders that the government orders are not being sent to the leaders. They are being sent to the offices and officers but they have not need given to the leaders. Unless the leasers have a Centre for getting information, they felt that it is very difficult to carry out their activities to the level of the expectations of the people. They require the details o the Act, rules, regulations, procedures, government orders, programs and schemes of the governments to be carried out in the rural and urban areas.

Next to training and information, the women leaders need a supportive organization which is able to support the women leaders when they are in trouble.

Women leaders are working in a given environment which is not so conducive for effective functioning of the women leaders. All the women leaders who are upright and committed have to face trials and tribulations in the society and they have to swim against the current, and hence they felt need for a supportive organization. This support can be done by the NGOs very effectively. Because honest women leaders have to face harassment from the vested interests they are being insulted and humiliated. The intensity of humiliation and insult will increase proportionate to the placement of the leader's caste in the social structure. Unparliamentarily words are freely used by the men members in the meeting of the council and sabhas to insult and threaten the women leaders. The Panchayat supportive Non-Governmental Organizations have to sensitize the women leaders periodically, as otherwise they will be non-sensitive towards the women issues. There is yet another expectation from the women leaders that the mentally depressed women leaders in a complicated social structure require proper and timely counseling. This counseling can be done by some committed NGOs continuously.



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