



Women political participation and panchayatraj institutions a historical perspective

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Abstract

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights "Women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making, including decision making in political process at all levels will be ensured for the achievements of the goals of Empowerment. Empowerment of women is a critical issue that is being debated all over the world, The Constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on sex and class, prohibiting human trafficking and forced labor, and reserving elected positions for women.

Keywords: women political, historical background, and perspective

Introduction

There is a need of participation of women in the institutions of Panchayat Raj. As PRIs are entrusted several developmental roles in the progress of the country. Particularly the participation of women has attained more significance after the amendment of 73rd Act. In India Panchayat Raj Institutions are the outcome of natural groupings and associations. Rural local governments existed during the Indus Valley civilization here has been no historical continuity of Panchayat Raj in India. The British India was ruled by a centralized system. After Independence the constituent Assembly set up two committees, one to draw up the union constitution and the second the Provincial committee. In neither of these committees, any mention was made of Panchayat of Gandhian ideals.

The Constitution of India establishes a parliamentary system of government, and guarantees its citizens the right to be elected, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and form associations, and vote ^[4]. The Constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on sex and class, prohibiting human trafficking and forced labor, and reserving elected positions for women. The Government of India directed state and local governments to promote equality by class and gender including equal pay and free legal aid, humane working conditions and maternity relief, rights to work and education, and raising the standard of living. Women were substantially involved in the Indian independence movement in the early 20th century and advocated for independence from Britain. Independence brought gender equality in the form of constitutional rights, but historically women's political participation has remained low.

Political Representation

The resolution on Panchayat Raj was moved by him in the Constituent Assembly. There was an all-round criticism of over centralization and denial of village government. It was thus village Panchayat found its way into Directive Principles

of state policy of the constitution. Article 40 of the constitution reads "The state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable to function as local self-government". The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) and Ashok Mehta committee (1978) recommended for nominal representation to women in the form of two representatives in each elected body of the PRIs. It was further stated that if no women came forward to become a representative women representation must be ensured by co-opting two women as members for the elected body. The committee on the National Perspective Plan for women 1988 recommended that 30% seats in local self-government as well as the post of president and vice president of these bodies must be reserved for women. The main objective of introducing Panchayat Raj system is to extend democracy up to grassroots level and ensure involvement of the people in all governmental process and development activities.

Women Empowerment: Concept

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights "Women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making, including decision making in political process at all levels will be ensured for the achievements of the goals of Empowerment. Empowerment of women is a critical issue that is being debated all over the world. This concept has its root in the women's movement throughout the world and particularly by the Third world feminists it is since the mid-1980s that this term became popular in the field of development, especially with reference to women. Empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International Women's in 1985 at Nairobi. In the present study women empowerment is presented as a concept that includes political level spheres of women's lives.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment

The 73rd & 74th amendment to the constitution of India in 1992 was a major step towards democratic decentralization. It

has led to greater participation & empowerment of Schedule Castes/Schedule Tribes and women in PRIs in the country. The reservation of seats in the 1993-94 election has brought in about eight lakhs women into political process in large numbers. Panchayat Raj Institutions have ushered in qualitative changes in the process of governances.

Women Empowerment: Activities of Panchayat Raj Institutions

Empowerment in general and self-employment in particular is intimately connected with women's empowerment. It was attempted to know what measures the PRIs had taken to implement employment schemes, especially swaranjayanti gram swarozgar yojana. It was played a positive role in organizing SHGs by calling meetings, helped in opening account in a bank, providing seed money, bank linkages etc. Many vocational training has been taken place to improve the conditions of the women. Training in skills like free computer education, tailoring garments, knitting, bakery sweets, food for anganwadies, health care, agriculture training, preparation of earth worm compost (Erehulu manure) small scale industrial training etc. Awareness camp for rural women has been taken place to improve the conditions of the women as well as the youths.

Women Political Participation-Voting

The movement for women's suffrage began in the early 1900s in response to a national movement for suffrage, even though vast majority of neither men nor women had a right to vote during the British colonial rule before 1947. After Indian independence from Britain, the Indian Constitution in 1950 officially granted women and men suffrage. Prior to universal suffrage, provincial legislatures had granted women the right to vote. Madras was the first to grant women's suffrage in 1921, but only to those men and women who owned land property according to British administration's records [7]. Other legislatures followed shortly after, but like Madras, the political rights were granted by British Raj to select few, and the London appointed Governor of each province had the right to overrule and nullify any law enacted by the elected men and women [8]. The rights granted in response to the movement towards suffrage were limited to qualifications of literacy and property ownership, including property ownership of husbands. This excluded vast majority of Indian women and men from voting, because they were poor. This changed in 1950 when universal suffrage was granted to all adult Indian citizens.

In 1950, universal suffrage granted voting rights to all women. India is a parliamentary system with two houses: Lok Sabha (lower house) and Rajya Sabha (upper house). Rates of participation among women in 1962 were 46.63% for Lok Sabha elections and rose to a high in 1984 of 58.60%. Male turnout during that same period was 63.31% in 1962 and 68.18% in 1984. The gap between men and women voters has narrowed over time with a difference of 16.7% in 1962 to 4.4% in 2009.

Voter turnout for national elections in the past 50 years has remained stagnant with turnout ranging between 50 to 60%. State elections have seen a growing trend in women's participation, and in some cases women's turnout is exceeding

male turnout [10]. Increased turnout of women was reported for the 2012 Vidhan Sabha elections (legislative/state assemblies) with states such as Uttar Pradesh reporting 58.82% to 60.29% turnout. In the 2013 assembly elections, women's overall turnout was reported to be 47.4%, and male turnout was 52.5%. Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Daman and Diu and Puducherry all reported higher turnouts among women than men in 2013.

Increased participation is occurring in both rich and poor states in India. The sex ratio of voters has improved from 715 female voters for every 1,000 male voters in the 1960s to 883 female voters in the 2000s. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has sought to increase voter turnout by cleaning up electoral rolls and removing missing or deceased members. Voter outreach has included door-to-door voter registration, and in 2014 elections, voters will be issued a photo id with polling station information to increase voter turnout. Increased voter turnout in India is also partially due to the women voters. ECI has sought to encourage voter registration among women and participation through education and outreach on college and university campuses. Growing participation has also been attributed to increased security at polling stations.

2014 Elections

Women turnout during India's 2014 parliamentary general elections was 65.63%, compared to 67.09% turnout for men [1]. In 16 out of 29 states of India, more women voted than men. A total of 260.6 million women exercised their right to vote in April-May 2014 elections for India's parliament.

Karnataka Experience: Historical Perspective

KARNATAKA'S first modern Panchayati raj legislation, crafted by the Janata Government of Ramakrishna Hegde, became law in 1983. The Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samithis, Mandal Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats Act, 1983 recognized the principle of party-based elections to the two tiers of elected office -- the Mandal Panchayats and Zilla Parishads -- that existed under that Act. When the Congress (I) returned to power in 1989, it rewrote the Act, to keep it in conformity, the government argued, with the provisions of the Constitution (73rd) Amendment. The new Karnataka Panchayati Raj Act introduced three tiers of Panchayat Raj institutions or PRIs which are the gram Panchayats, the taluk Panchayats and the Zilla Panchayats. Elections to the taluk and Zilla Panchayats were made party-based, whereas in respect of the gram Panchayats they remained 'non-political'. In practice this is a principle recognized only for formal purposes, as gram Panchayat elections are as politicized as any other democratic exercise. Critics of this law argue that it is undemocratic and counterproductive to try and shut politics out of the election process. Apart from the fact that it just does not work, legal mandates such as these would only legitimize other, more regressive, social categories such as caste and religion.

The Opposition Janata Dal (S) in Karnataka has asked the State Election Commission, to look into what it alleges are large-scale revisions of voters' lists by the official machinery, made under pressure from Congress (I) legislators, in order that *bona fide* voters' names be excluded and the names of

under-aged voters included. "Normally there is a two to three per cent change in the number of voters when electoral rolls are revised, owing to death, migration and so on," said C. Narayanaswamy, spoke person of the Janata Dal (S), former Member of Parliament, and a person highly regarded for his knowledge of and involvement in the Panchayati raj experiment in the State. Narayanaswamy told *Frontline*: "This time, in respect of more than 100 vill ages in the Devanahalli Assembly constituency, the ruling party machinery has inflated the rolls and put the names of supporters who have not even crossed 13 years of age. While it is to the credit of the government that elections of this magnitude went off peacefully, the State Election Commission must conduct an enquiry into this and rectify these anomalies before the taluk and Zilla Panchayat elections."

In Karnataka, one-third or 33 per cent of all seats are reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and another one-third for the Backward Classes under the two categories A and B. Of this BCM (Backward Communities) A, which accounts for 26.6 per cent of the gram Panchayat seats, comprises 192 communities and includes Muslims, Buddhists and Dalit Christians. BCM (B), which accounts for just 6.4 per cent of the seats, comprises nine communities and has an income qualification as well.

Within each of these categories, a further one-third is reserved for women. In order that no constituency returns the same category candidate twice, the seats are rotated for every election (held once in five years). Thus, if a two-member constituency is reserved for a general category man and a Scheduled Tribe woman, it could well be reserved for a BCM (B) woman and a Scheduled Caste man in the next.

Yet another interesting feature of these elections was the large number of candidates who were elected unopposed. Just under 20,000 of the 75,200, or a little over one-fourth of those who won, were elected unopposed. Is this a reflection of the political dominance of caste and/or landed interests in the countryside, or are there other reasons behind it? This correspondent visited several villages in the districts of Kolar and Tumkur in order to ascertain the levels of participation and involvement of village residents, political parties and candidates in the election process. In most of the villages of Bageppalli Assembly constituency the fights were clearly between the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Congress (I) and a rebel Congress group. "There are three or four factors behind the high numbers of unopposed candidates," Sriram Reddy, a former CPI (M) legislator from the Bageppalli constituency in Kolar district, said. According to Sriram Reddy, one factor was the system of reservation itself. When the reservation category changes, very often a party cannot immediately find a suitable candidate. Sometimes there are vested interests - political, caste and financial - that come together to ensure that a candidate gets elected unopposed. Sriram Reddy said: "Despite all the negative features of this election-caste domination, money and muscle-power, corruption, political rivalry, widespread distribution of liquor - gram Panchayat elections are still a very positive development which has resulted in people becoming aware of their rights. There has been a broadening of people's participation in politics and governance, and a big increase in women's participation too."

Although the 1993 Act was supposed to have been framed keeping in view the requirements laid down in the Constitution (73rd) Amendment, it is seen as far weaker in respect of real decentralization than the 1983 Act. "There are three features that reflect the strength or weakness of a Panchayati Raj system," Narayanaswamy argues. "They are the administrative, financial and planning powers of the PRIs and the extent of autonomy they enjoy under all these heads." The old Act, according to him, provided for all this and developed "district governments and decentralized administration" in a real sense. Under the 1983 Act, 27 sectors of development were under the Zilla Parishad, most of which have returned to State government control. "Through the 1993 Act, the Congress decentralized governance to the bureaucrats in the PRIs who come under the direct control of the government." The sweeping changes brought in by the 1993 Act were not strongly contested by the Opposition Janata Dal at that time.

Real decentralization shook the hold of local political interests, and was opposed by most members of the State legislature, cutting across party lines. Several Panchayat members whom *Frontline* spoke to complained about the fact that funds that devolved to gram panchayats were in large part tied funds, and there was little leeway they had in matters of planning and budgeting. V. Umadevi, the Pradhan of Kottakotta Panchayat in Bagepalli taluk said that of a yearly allocation of Rs.1,50,000 her Panchayat receives, Rs.90,000 is tied and goes towards street lighting charges, employees' salaries and so on. "There is very little money left for us to use in any village development," she said. Despite these constraints, the Panchayati Raj system, now in its third elected tenure, has changed politics and governance in most of Karnataka. The taluk and Zilla Panchayat elections, due to be held before May 3, will further extend and deepen people's participation in governance.

Thus, Karnataka's contribution in extending the reservation for women along with OBCs has gained significance. Its experience and attempts are still relevant because model for the other states

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