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## SC WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS - A STUDY OF HARYANA

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**Abstract:**-The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of the Indian constitution has provided a new dimension to the phenomenon of women's empowerment in India. Apart from one-third reservation of women in the bodies of local-self govt., it has given some legal powers and responsibilities for a wide range of issues pertaining to the development of society. The present paper aims at assessing and analysing the effectiveness of SC women in Panchayati Raj in two districts of Haryana namely Bhiwani and Rohtak. 80 SCs women representatives elected for Zila, block and Gram Panchayat from sixty Gram Panchayats were selected for the depth study. There was at least one SC women representative in the selected Gram Panchayats.

**Keywords:** Amendment, Constitution, Development, Empowerment, Panchayat.

### INTRODUCTION:

In Indian women constitute about 49 per cent of the country's population. For centuries, their position in a patriarchal society has been deteriorating. In the pre-Independence days Gandhiji tried with great amount of success to improve their lot. After independence efforts were redoubled efforts has been made remove various gender biases to guarantee equal status to women.

The Constitutions of India not only guarantees certain rights and privileges to all citizens, but also makes special positions for women through Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of the State Policy. To safeguard various Constitutional rights of the women, the government has enacted various act from time to time. Now government is trying to pass a legislation providing 1/3rd seats for women in Parliament and in the State Legislative Assemblies to ensure their adequate representation in decision-making.

Despite all these Constitutional and legal provisions, the experience shows that men traditional hegemony continuous to be strong and deep rooted. The facts against equality of status are too glaring. At the same time in spite of various socio-economic programmes for women, their status has only marginally improved, their sex ratio is showing a decline, life expectancy at the birth has decreased, infant and maternal mortality rates have increased and their participation in the work force has declined.

### SCHEDULED CASTES AND THEIR STATUS

Dalits, otherwise known as Scheduled Castes constitute the lowest strength of the Indian society. They constitute about 17 percent of the country's population. In Haryana SCs population is about 20 percent and their literacy is around 25 percent against the state literacy average of about 65 percent. Though SCs have always been an integral part of the society, civilization and economy, they have remained socially, economically, educationally and politically backward. A large majority of them are agricultural or casual labourers living below the poverty line There is a close relationship between caste and occupation.

After independence with the realization that real development cannot take root if it bypasses one section of the society who represent the very kernel around which societal re-orientation must take place. Since then government, has, committed itself to improve the status of SCs. It has directed all its efforts towards removing various social biases and, thus, guaranteeing right to equality all the citizens of the country irrespective of the caste, creed and religion basis. The Constitution prescribes protection and safeguards for Scheduled Castes, either specifically or by way of general rights of citizens, with the

object of promoting their educational and economic interests and of removing certain social disabilities the Scheduled Castes were subjected to.

In order, to increase the viability of the Constitutional provisions and various development programmes, the next logical step was to enhance their participation in the decisions making process which is thought to be the main cause for the non achievement of the stipulated targets.

#### **PARTICIPATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

"When we look at women's participation in decision making in the historical perspective, we note that women like Rupa and Vaisvarya were members of Sabha and Samiti even in the early Vedic period. However, as time passed, the ancient tradition was lost and the place of women in medieval India was not enjoyable. The colonial era was highly injurious to women's rights. After independence, new initiatives were taken to restore the prestige of women in Indian society. Women participation through PRIs is one of them.

73rd Constitutional Amendment came into effect on April 24, 1993 allocated 29 subjects to the panchayat, fixed five years term, created the State Finance Commission and the State Election Commission, and enjoined that if the panchayats were dissolved before the expiration of the term then the state was supposed to conduct election of the panchayats within six months of dissolution. The Act reserves 1/3rd of the seats for women in the village, Block and Zila Panchayats. Even 1/3rd of posts of Chairpersons have been reserved for the women. These women include general and Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes category both. The Act provides for the reservation of 1/3 seats for Scheduled Castes women out of the total seats reserved for Scheduled Castes.

#### **SC WOMEN IN HARYANA GRAM PANCHAYATS**

Keeping in view the Constitutional requirement the Haryana Panchayati Raj Act was passed on 21 April, 1994 and subsequent Panchayat elections have been held. As a result large number of general and scheduled castes women were elected to the panchayats. About 9 lac female have been elected to the three tiers of Panchayats in India. In Haryana alone about 21926 women have been elected to the different tiers of panchayats. 4583 of them belong to SC. As is evident from the figures, the number of women in general and SC women in particular has increased significantly in local politics in recent years. The very presence of these persons as Members and Chairpersons of these elected local bodies is a significant step forward in participatory development and decision making. But it does not mean that their participation has really increased.

The social standing of women is still quite low and as such they are either taken for granted or they are ignored. Decisions are usually taken by local and powerful males. A number of stakeholders have ensured that the elected SC women representatives remain inactive. It is in this context that the present study has been conducted.

#### **Objectives of the study & study Area**

Present study aims at assessing and analysing the effectiveness of SC women in Panchayati Raj in two districts of Haryana namely Bhiwani and Rohtak. 80 SCs women representatives elected for Zila, block and Gram Panchayat from sixty Gram Panchayats were selected for the depth study. There was at least one SC women representative in the selected Gram Panchayats. Data was collected both from primary and secondary sources. Three structured interview schedule was used to collect primary data. Observation and informal discussion with the villagers and elected representatives also helped in finding out the ground realities.

#### **MAJOR FINDINGS**

1. In Haryana after the 1994 panchayat's elections have thrown up an interesting pattern of leadership that most of the elected women representatives are between the age group of 30 to 50 years. Most of them are illiterate and live in joint families with multiplicity of roles to perform. Lack of education has become a major obstacle in their participation. Unable to understand the basics of the working of the panchayats they appear to be disinterested in the task they are supposed to participate. Their participation rate is generally low.

Most of the women representatives are either agricultural or casual labourers, with family income ranging from Rs. 25000 to Rs. 60000. Some of them have an income of less than Rs. 10,0001- per annum.

2. Most of the women have been elected for the first time. Two factors appear responsible for this. First, due to rotation of reserved seats the women elected earlier had to contest against male candidates. Usually they did not seek reservation. Second, in some cases, the performance of the elected women representatives was so poor that they could not get reelected.

3. Participation alone is not enough but the participation has to be effective. Effectiveness comes only when there is awareness. The study reveals that women are not even aware about their powers, functions and responsibilities, it was found that many of them did not even know what role they are expected to play in the panchayats. There were only a few SC women representatives who were aware at least to some extent about their job roles. They felt that adequate powers and functions have not been given to the elected representatives.

4. The SC women are of the view that the elections should be held in a free and fair atmosphere, and the code of conduct for elections issued by the State Election Commission be strictly followed. Alcohol and violence has come to vitiate the electoral atmosphere. Powerful people (rural elites) come to play a major role and try to influence the election. They did not like the panchayat elections to be held on party lines because that would vitiate the environment and threaten the very foundation of village life.

5. Most of the SC women respondents were of the view that the panchayats were not functioning properly. The Gram Sabhas did not meet regularly. Fictitious formalities were completed to show that the meetings were held regularly. Even if a meeting was held, development plans of the village were never discussed. More often than not the meetings ended in factional and petty fights. There was no adequate and proper coordination between the three tiers of the panchayats. As such, the panchayats were not playing the role that they ought to play.

6. The problem of proxy representation in panchayats is a common complaint. Since the women representatives were illiterate; they lacked leadership qualities and remained in veil. In a number of cases the husbands have taken over their functions. It was also observed that in some cases a son or the father-in-law represented her in the meetings. At times it was so desired by the male family members to enjoy the benefits of office of the elected representatives.

7. Most of the elected representatives agree that their status has been enhanced by virtue of their being elected to the panchayats. However, in terms of effective participation in the panchayat affairs much more is desired. The study reveals that reservation can only empower women to a certain extent but for the elected representatives to play an active role in decision making, there are other factors that need to be addressed to.

8. Even though a number of powers and functions have been devolved to the panchayats yet these are really not meaningful powers. The local bureaucracy continues to play a major role in the day to day working of the panchayats. Resource mobilization is inadequate to meet the development needs. The problem gets compounded because the scheduled caste representatives are not even aware of their powers and functions. They do not know the sources of resources leave aside generating funds. Being illiterate and ignorant, the chances of funds being misutilised are very common. Even if the Gram Panchayat land is encroached upon the SC representatives are helpless. They do not even know where and how complaints are to be filed.

9. A majority of the scheduled caste representatives expressed the view that rural elites, politicians and the local level bureaucracy has not allowed the panchayat to function properly. The attitude of the bureaucracy is more of arrogance. The SC representatives feel that the nexus between the politicians and the local level bureaucracy has hampered the functioning of the panchayats to a large extent. The Constitutional Amendment has not really liberated the panchayats from the clutches of the politicians, local level bureaucracy and the rural elites.

10. Most of the elected SC women representatives were of the view that their family members were generally supportive in their new roles. However, there are a number of traditional societal barriers, that came in the way of their effective participation. However, once the women are elected due to lack of basic skills and knowledge the male members of the family come to play an important role. In some cases, it has also been observed that the husbands have been insulating the SC women representatives from doing wrong things on the advice of other panchayat members.

11. The cross section of the villages do not have much expectations from the SC elected women representatives. As they lack both knowledge and skills required to discharge their functioning effectively. They are also of the view that since most of the SC women representatives are not even aware of the schemes it is difficult to comprehend how rural development is going to take place. They are of the opinion that an elected representative must have the required knowledge, skill and leadership qualities to accelerate the pace of rural development. Other problem is that since most of them are from the underprivileged section of the society they are more busy in earning their day to day bread. As a result, they have very little time and energy to devote to the development of the village. Even then members of cross section agree that SC women's awareness about panchayats has increased to some extent and villagers sensitivity towards them has also increased. They are of the view that panchayats are still dominated by the upper castes who discourage SC women from taking active part in the Gram Panchayat meetings. Despite this SC women's participation in PRIs has increased to some extent. Their participation has enhanced their confidence and status as has been agreed upon by about 65 percent of the people of cross section. Family members, particularly the husband interferes in the discharge of the duties by SC elected women representatives.

12. The officials are of the view that even though efforts have been made to impart training to the elected SC women representatives but due to high level of illiteracy the desired results are not forthcoming. They lack basic skills to understand and executive development programmes and schemes. Since they lack in awareness there are a number of influences over them. They are not assertive. Officials also agree that proxy representation of general and SC women's is there in PRIs. Family members, particularly the husband who played a key role in motivating the female SC women representatives. But they are also the hurdles in their effective participation in PRIs. The officers have been discouraging the husbands from taking part in the functioning of the panchayats. They help the elected SC women to understand, their job role and display leadership qualities. As a result of which SC women representatives are much more confident and they have the desire to learn. Relationship between SC women representatives and officials is cooperative. Officials are now, sensitive and sympathetic towards the SC women representatives to a large extent. Overall they are of the opinion that women's participation has increased but the need is to enhance their capacity and capability to play a major role in decision making.



### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Today a large number of women have come to occupy leadership position in the panchayats. Panchayati Raj which were thought be the main agency for involving women in the decision making at the grass root level and to serve as a channel for linking them from Gram Sabha to the Lok Sabha by acting as a training ground for democracy and political education do not seem to be that much successful as of now. Many women are not aware of their role and responsibilities in PRIs, many others who now about them do not assert themselves owing to social inhibitions and disabilities. Proxy representation is there at all the three levels. Instead it would be correct to say that women many times are compelled to contest the elections so as to sub serve the interest of the idle/unemployed husband, son in some cases even of the father-in-law. Bureaucracy and politicians are indifferent to their lack of participation in the PRIs functioning instead in some cases they promote proxy representation. Their voice in the meeting is not given due weight. Participation is meaningless if women are unheard, no opportunity is provided for them to articulate their views and they are not recognised as leaders.

However, there is a need for those women, having gained the necessary experience and knowledge, to now come forward and independently take on their roles as leaders. While there might be a need for the women representatives to take the support of their family members in implementation of programmes requiring high levels of technical know how, programmes and issues like health education, supervision etc. are being and should be handled by the women themselves independently. Efforts need to be made to impart practical trainings and provide them with other relevant information support so that they can discharge their roles effectively. Similarly, their families, community members and concerned government functionaries also need to be sensitized to support and encourage these women to come forward as leaders. It would be wrong to say that a large number of women in PRIs indicates that there is a major shift or step in women's participation in decision making. A gradual process of empowerment has began and in due course of time as awareness increases women will play a major role in local level affairs. A number of problems in their participation are apparent, more so because of the traditional base of the rural society.

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