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WOMEN - EMPOWERMENT  
(AN ANALYSIS IN CONTEXT OF PANCHAYATI RAJ.)



Sangeeta Rachiyata

INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, the major change that took place in context of women functionaries of PRIs was political representation of women through reservation. About one million women entered in the first election of panchayats after 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. About 40 percent of the elected women represented the marginalised sections. However, about 70 percent women representatives were illiterate and most of them had no previous political experience. But the apprehension that they will be manipulated by men has been largely disproved. The entry of women has deep impact on gender equity. We can say that women have to go a long way to make

Abstract

*The traditional institutions of local governance have not given space for women. Many of the factors that hindered women in the earlier system continue to exist and operate in rural areas. In fact gender as a phenomenon hardly ever appears in a pure form. It is almost always alloyed with caste, class and religious factors. Through the implementation of reservation in panchayats women have got an opportunity to raise their concerns and opinion in Gram sabha. Their experiences in the PRIs have also been varied and at times startling. Nevertheless, women in PRIs still lack the capacity and capability to raise voice against the various issues. The opportunities relating to raising issues and participating in decision-making process need to be strengthened by adequate training and capacity building. This may help these women representatives tide over the social and economic disadvantage and face male domination and bureaucratic apathy.*

**Keywords :** Women - Empowerment, traditional institutions, religious factors.

Short Profile

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their presence in the power struggles once dominated by men.

Now some of the pertinent questions are - what has been the impact of PRIs on women individually? Why is it that so many of them say they do not wish to contest elections again, in spite of the fact that it has given them power and status? Is it that they have only male role models that they do not wish to follow? Has this experience taught them that they cannot change the system without joining it, in all its corruption? This needs deeper probing.

The experiences of women in the PRIs has been so varied, across the three levels of the PRIs and the different states

that except for some "tautological" statements little can be said. We need to differentiate the

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women who hail from families with political background and those who can be termed as "first generation political aspirants" - women who drifted into PRIs due to the 73rd Amendment. Even though the amendment made the 'space' for both these groups to enter the PRIs, the alacrity with which they take to the new role will vary. This is to be noted that hitherto, space for women to participate in institutions like the PRIs, which are in the "public sphere", was negligible. Consequently, the early entrants have had only "male role models" of political leadership. Thus, we have had women in a double blind - to be seen as effective, they have to take to masculine ways and when they do that they cease representing women's interests.

Form everywhere, there is an often-heard comment that many of these women would not like to contest in the next round of elections. Why is that so? Is it a pointer to their 'unsuitability' to assume leadership? Or an inability to cope with multiple and conflicting role demands? Or is it time to ask ourselves what is it about PRIs (and politics) that makes it unpalatable to half of humanity, even when it can determine the quality of life. Added to this is the fact that the women who have come under reservation have come in with their social and economic disadvantages - mostly non-literate, with little productive assets, largely dependent on wage labour and into a rural society that has fixed places for various castes and gender. These cannot be changed by a wave of the constitutional amendment wand.

Experience has taught people to go slow to approach their goal indirectly. They have to decide if attending panchayat meetings is sometimes worth missing their daily wage. This is even more so in the case of women, who have to worry about crying babies and hungry husband. As of now, it is unrealistic to expect much in terms of their response. It has first to be demonstrated that the system is indeed here to stay.

The new system coexists with traditional institutions. The elders wield power in a way that the Constitution makers may not have foreseen.

If the PRIs are to succeed in their main goals, then they must work in harmony with these traditional institutions, not confront them head-on. This is easier said than done. The traditional institutions have not given space for women. Many of the factors that hindered women in the earlier system continue to exist and operate in rural areas. In fact gender as a phenomenon hardly ever appears in a pure form. It is almost always alloyed with caste, class and religious factors. In matters where there is a clash between gender and caste or class, it is impossible to expect women to align themselves with other women, going against their caste or class loyalties. Some women have developed political ambitions too, especially when it is seen as a quick means for upward mobility, and political survival will be difficult if they betray class and caste interests. This is why the reservation of the post of president to the SC/ST category is so resented. The problem is in society, not in the panchayat that only reflects social reality.

The main problem that the women face in panchayati Raj, is per se in the exercise of the powers and function as a whole which have been provided by the Constitution to them. This is because of lack of delegation, resources and 'archaic' mindset of men in their home, in society and in the bureaucracy. The most important problem relates to the difficulties they are facing in the form of 'interference of Government officials and other influential persons in their jurisdiction'.

Types of interference faced by women functionaries in panchayats have been identified in Table 1.

- ★ Interference of women in panchayat administration
- ★ Secretary is not accountable to gram panchayat
- ★ Proper support from government officials (is not forthcoming)
- ★ No respect for women from administration

- ★ Problem of 'Prdhan Pati'
- ★ Political interference from other sources
- ★ Social forestry is not entrusted to panchayats
- ★ There is no official/formal relationship between self-help (SHG) groups and gram and gram panchayats (GPs).

It we look at the issue of political interference, the crux of the problem again boils down to non-delegation of powers and lack of ability of the women functionaries to resist interferences (from politicians, contractors, husbands and 'other sources'). The core-strategy to ward off external interference to the working of the PRIs, would be to empower the women in panchayats and create a 'body' of such women which can act as a source of support to them and as a pressure point against insidious interference by outsiders.

Second set of problems related to the women functionaries are planning, developing a village level plan according to the demands of the community and implementation of the approved plan in the village. Starting from the preparation to implementation of the these representatives face a series of problems as given below.

#### PROBLEM OF RESOURCES

- o Problem in implementation on plans prepared by the panchayat body in the block/district
- o It takes longer time to pass gram panchayat proposal for implementation at the district level.
- o Insufficient availability of fund for development of Panchayat MP-MLA funds not linked to panchayats. There is no consultation with panchayats for use of MP/MLA area development funds.
- o Funds are not transferred fully (there are cuts and leakages)
- o Funds come indirectly to GPs - bribes need to be paid (to the sanctioning / disbursing authority)

Source : Rajiv Gandhi Foundation

The key issues relating to planning are

paltry devolution of resources and public thievery. Because resources do not come to the gram panchayats, funds pass through bureaucratic channel which delays execution of works and more importantly, takes its slice of the cake. The seriousness of the 'cuts' assumes even greater importance because, the resource base of PRIs being small, a cut makes it even smaller.

Women and challenges are almost synonymous. As the Indian society is not very open for women, they face challenges both at the political and social levels. Most of the challenges faced by women functionaries in the PRIs in the different states States have a lot in common as given below in Table 3.

An analysis of the challenges clearly reveals the structural, social and administrative issues. Changes in social mores and mindset of people at large are critical for women in PRIs to be effective. With archaic social mores and mindset, family support for women working in PRIs is hesitant at best and outright hostile at worst. This is a major issue that must be tackled.

On the structural issues, the challenge of increasing the representation of women in PRIs increases to match the proportion of women in the total population, the number of women in PRIs will increase. With the increase in 'mass' of women in PRIs, the quality of the performance of women in PRIs will also improve which in turn will lead to better governance at the local level. The challenge of increasing reservation of seats for women members from the existing 33 per cent to 50 percent is formidable.

#### CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN MEMBERS OF PRIs

- ★ Securing 50 percent representation (of women in PRIs)
- ★ Establishing rapport with government officials
- ★ Arranging to provide knowledge about duties and roles to both female and male members of PRIs

- ✦ Increase the transparency in panchayats
- ✦ Form 'Panchayat maitri' groups
- ✦ Demonstrate that we are "as good or better than men"
- ✦ Commission to government officials to approve the work

Source : Rajiv Gandhi Foundation

On the administrative issues, building 'bridges', with the bureaucracy is a big challenge. With 'restrained' devolution of resources and limited delegation of powers, the bureaucracy still holds the key to the success of women in PRIs. Starting from changing the bureaucrats' perception about women in PRIs, Starting from changing the bureaucrats' perception about women, their attitudes and behaviour towards panchayat functionaries, to their willingness to let go of their hold on the PRIs for the good of the greatest number - all make up a complex interlocking challenge for the women in PRIs.

### Opportunities

It is frankly recognised 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 and are detailed in Table 4.

### OPPORTUNITIES

- Thirty three percent reservation in panchayats
- To participate in national level discussions /events
- To raise women's issues in panchayat - like lack of access to water, health, electricity.
- Opportunities to take up issues specific to women and children
- To take decisions in development of panchayats

- Opportunities provided by gram sabhas - an occasion for large number of women to participate and raise their concerns
- Establish a relationship between public and women representatives
- Opportunity in proper identification of BPL families
- Creation of women SHGs through women panchayat members
- Opportunity for women presidents to express their views and ideas

Through the implementation of 33 percent 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.

### Self-empowerment

One specific area for improving the effectiveness of women panchayat leaders is self-empowerment. The skills and abilities that need to be developed in the women leaders, to call them 'empowered' have been identified in Box.1

A small number of women functionaries of PRIs have fairly high levels of skills and abilities to feel that they are empowered. However about 40-60 percent of them still fall short of the "optimum levels" of ability to march forward, ability to ensure public participation and educate their constituencies impartially. While most of the elements of empowerment are present in the women functionaries, it is somewhat surprising that many of them have the characteristics of empowerment at levels, just above the 50 percent mark and only a few

see themselves as fully empowered. Thus, while women functionaries/members in PRIs are in the decision-making process, there is much that is left to be desired on many of the elements. The message is clear: much more work on empowerment of women in PRIs is urgently called for.

### Social Mobilization with Gender Focus

When we talk about gender focus on social mobilisation, it includes alliances of women and for the women. But for social mobilisation it is critical to have a mass of social capital. Thus, social capital and importance of alliance building for women PRI members cannot be ignored. Some of the elements needed for social capital for a community are listed in the Box 2.

During a training Workshop at Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi an exercise was done with the women PRI members, in order to find the levels of the elements that make the social capital of PRIs. The picture that emerged from this exercise is captured in Table 5.

An analysis of the table indicates a very varied picture, consistent with the general belief about the different levels of development in the states.

If we examine columns of Table 5, signifying the levels of the elements that make the social capital of PRIs, it seems that different states are at varying levels of achievement on the different elements. On the whole, it comes out that most of the states have rather low level of social capital (in the range of 26-50%). It is striking that all southern states (A.P. Kerala, T.N. and Goa) and Haryana, have higher levels of all the elements of social capital. Curiously enough, contrary to popular understanding, Maharashtra does not come out as a front-runner in this regard. Some other states (Assam and Orissa) having large tribal populations, otherwise fairly low on different elements, have scored high on the existence of social institutions. This is

probably because tribal communities traditionally have their own very strong social institutions.

### Solutions to the Problems of Women Members in PRIs

It is important to work on the solutions to the problems, which women panchayat members are facing and explore ways and means to meet the challenges. In Table 6 some solutions to the problems have been identified to overcome the hindrances in meeting the challenges.

We have also reflected on some of the activities on how to operationalise the solutions suggested

### Activities to Operationalise the Solutions

#### 1. Raising Funds

- 40 percent of state plans funds to be transferred to GPs.
- Direct (flow of) funds to GPs.
- Funds related to the following to be transferred to the GPs - fisheries, agriculture, dairy, social welfare, social forestry, rural development, and SC/ST development.
- Birth, death and marriage registration to be handed over to GPs.
- Clarification, demarcation and handing-over of Panchayat lands for development-revenue mobilisation.
- Ponds to be handed over to GPs.

2. Payment of commission to government officials for approving the work of PRIs to be stopped.

#### 3. To form watch-groups based on legal rights.

- (Carry out) Social Audit.
- Power to write CR (Confidential Report) of Government officials be vested in PRIs.
- Knowledge of anti-corruption bill.
- Unity amongst the women PRIs.
- Collectively develop an alternative culture of

integrity.

- Thirty three percent reservation (for women) in State Assemblies and Parliament.

Demonstrate that we are as good as or better than men.

- Women representatives concentrate more on child and women welfare.
- Women feel more comfortable with women representatives.
- Consider women's opinion in framing/changing systems and rules.
- Obtain training on legal matters.
- Appoint legal adviser for women representatives.
- Women representatives be (made) more confident.
- Empower women.
- Work with a challenging mindset.

4. Establishing a network of women GP members.

- Establish contact with women panchayat members.
- Discuss with the women members about the network.
- Networks should be at the village, block and district level (and be federated).

5. Stop the unnecessary interference of MLAs, MPs and other state leaders.

- Additions/amendments to be done in the Constitutional Law.
- Funds to be given to panchayats directly. No interference of district officials.
- Inter co-ordination between MLAs, MPs - PRIs to be established.
- As per 73rd Amendment total powers to be entrusted to Panchayats.
- Women members of PRIs to be trained in Panchayat Acts.
- Fifty percent of State Government funds to be released to Panchayats directly.
- Panchayat presidents to be elected through direct election.

- Remove provisions for no confidence motion.
- Increase Knowledge of women members so that they have less difficulty in functioning properly.
- Regular training programme for women functionaries by government.
- Regular information flow to panchayat members through informal network and group.
- Develop reading habit for journals on panchayats.
- Use of low cost media for information dissemination.
- Responsibility to create suitable environment for women's empowerment.
- Increase income through creating livelihood opportunities for women.
- Entrust GPs (not NGOs) with responsibility for promoting SHGs.
- Majority representation of women in statutory and village development committees.
- Prohibition of liquor.
- Eliminate male domination.
- Ensuring that only elected representation, not proxies, represent GPs formally.
- Monthly meetings, specifically between women representatives and administration.
- Men should be sensitised about women's right.
- special effort to raise self-confidence of women representatives.
- Impart trainings - on how to run panchayats, conduct meetings, and provide information about rules of business and procedures to be followed.
- Increase awareness amongst women representatives.
- Legal literacy for all women.

There is a need for free flow information to the women members/functionaries of the panchayats, building a system by which the members/functionaries of PRIs can exchange data and information, building the capability of the members/functionaries of PRIs to build and sustain alliances to take forward issues of



governance, building bridges with the bureaucracy and cutting out payment of bribes) and establishing a network of members of panchayats to lobby for changes and for advocacy.

To facilitate the capacity building of women members/functionaries of PRIs training has to be imparted on philosophy, law, panchayati Raj governance, structure, gender and the Indian Constitution which would be relevant to PRIs. Skills have to be developed in elements of planning for social and economic development and programme management at the village level. The women functionaries have to be trained in finding ways and means to offer effective challenge and resistance to invidious social mores; customs, beliefs and stereotyping that disempowered women functionaries. These could be organizational, institutional or structural. Further they also require guidance on building and sustaining mechanisms and systems to counter rampant public thievery of panchayat funds.

Training programmes should ensure continuity and touch upon several aspects not only on the basics of panchayati raj and knowledge about government schemes. The government training programmes lack a comprehensive and gender sensitive approach. The NGOs' training programmes are limited in terms of out-reach and frequency, though strong on conceptual front. Women face multiple oppressions and have to cope with additional control on their mobility. The training package has to be more meaningful which imparts practical skills and encourages them to take on the political challenge.

Lack of empathy and support to PRIs by political and bureaucratic structures has created innumerable hurdles in the functioning of these agencies. Institutionalized inequalities and pressures sabotage attempts at capacity building of elected women representatives. It is important to create platforms that would act as pressure

points to force powers that be to bring about changes in attitudes and behaviour of political and bureaucratic executives towards women functionaries of PRIs.

Stressing the need to make these provisions truly effective, there is a critical necessity of empowering women and doing away with surrogate representatives for this purpose. "Training of women representatives must not begin with the promise that women are themselves responsible for the lack of social and cultural capital. The situation is a systematic failure. Therefore, even the trainer must start from what the participants know and then take them to the arena of the unknown....Building up community support networks for women members should be an important component of training intervention".

Emphasis on procedures and programmes, rather than political process and critical issues that women encounter, is not going to usher in a qualitative change in the participation of women. Majority of women representatives are now showing their determination to occupy public space and are fighting for their rights and legitimate space. In their struggle against entrenched systems disempowering them, they have to overcome many hurdles, such as conditions of poverty, social responsibility for the domestic unit, growing criminalization of political process and interlocking of other social relations with gender relations. This is just a small beginning, though, and much remains to be done before we can actually claim to have empowered the women elected members of panchayati raj.

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