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## Women representation in Panchayat raj institutions a case study of Shimoga District

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### Abstract

The Article focus mainly on the constitutional provision for women to get representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the constitution provides reservation for women which opens up the avenues to participate in preparing action plan, collection of revenue, allocation of resources, identification of beneficiaries at village level. These representatives have a “big say” in the decision – making process.

The Researcher has the primary objective of examining the aspects live; a) to see whether reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions have enabled them to realize their potential as decision-makers. C) To understand to what extent women members participate in the process of decision-making.

An empirical study was conducted in shivamogga District of Karnataka. The study covered one Zilla Panchayat, three Taluk Panchayat Samithies and 15 Grama Panchayats. Few women members were more dynamic in carrying out their roles and responsibilities. The important causes for representation being only nominal are: lack of education, patriarchal society, absence of courage and boldness, prevalence of shyness and inhibition, familial responsibilities etc. As a result women members have not completely succeeded in taking proactive participation in the administrative and developmental affairs of PRIs.

**Keywords:** Representation, Panchayat, institutions, case, Shimoga

### Introduction

Representation is a prime phenomenon of modern democratic system. Needless to say democratic countries in the present world are welfare states in the sense that the main goal of the state is not maintenance of law and order but to ensure good and happy life of their citizens. Accordingly, the very survival of the system depends on and is governed, regulated and monitored by people’s participation through representation. The Experience of democracies all over the world in general and India in particular has shown that centralized political system is not responsive to the needs of the people. It has therefore, been increasingly realised that administrative mechanism should percolate down the stream so as to reach the common man. This calls for an alternative institutional mechanism to ensure and enable people’s participation in politics and administration in a meaningful way. The introduction of Panchayat Raj System is a step in this direction.

Decentralization is not limited to any particular segment. On the other hand it encompasses the whole social setup. This is evident from the process of political decentralization that has taken place in India. The 73<sup>rd</sup> 74<sup>th</sup> amendments were made to the Constitution of India with the objective of ensuring both political and administrative decentralization. This culminated in the creation of the both rural and urban local self-government throughout the length and breadth of the country [2].

This decentralization process was undertaken in the background of political, social and economic scenario of the country. An opportunity has been created to people of all sections including backward and depressed classes for political representation in these local self-administrative bodies. A salient feature of this process of decentralization is the provision to give adequate representation to women. As much as 33% of seats in PRIs have been reserved for women only with the primary objective of women empowerment through political representation.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution provides reservation within reservation in the sense that in the total reservation for women there is reservation of seats in PRIs for SC, ST, BCM

(‘A’ & ‘B’) and General category on the basis of the size of population with in the locality. On account of this, women of all sections of society have an opportunity to actively participate in PRIs. This participation is in the form of preparation of action plan, collection of revenue, allocation of resources, identification of beneficiaries etc. Women representatives have ‘big say’ in the decision-making process.

### **Representation to women in Panchayat raj in Karnataka**

Karnataka has been acclaimed as a progressive state far ahead in the issue of local self-government. Committees were constituted from time to time, by the State Government to examine the possibilities improving and strengthening of panchayat raj institutions. Venkatappa Committee and Dr. H. Chandrashekaraiiah committee were setup in 1950 and 1954 respectively. These committees recommended a lot of measures for strengthening PRS and improve its working. Subsequently, in 1959 Mysore Village Panchayats and Local Board Act was enacted. This Act made provision for reservation to SC, ST and BCM categories. The objective was to bring people of hitherto exploited classes to the mainstream. But none of these committees took up the issue of women representation. It was the 1983 Act of Karnataka that provided the major breakthrough.

As late as in 1983 the government of Karnataka brought into force the Karnataka Zilla Parishad, Taluk Panchayat Samitis, Mandal Panchayats and Navya Panchayats Act. Then Chief Minister Mr. Ramakrishna Hedge and his cabinet colleague Mr. Abdul Nazir Sahed were instrumental in enacting this act. It was their election promise to ensure decentralization in administration and in fulfilment of this promise then Janata Government in power established two tier system of local self-government namely Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat. It is held that the above said Act of 1983 was the first of its kind in the whole world in giving 25% reservation to women in representation to local bodies in Karnataka

In pursuance of 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the constitution in 1991, the government of India enacted the Panchayat Raj Act on 22<sup>nd</sup> Dec. 1992. It Came into force on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1993. The Act made provision for the establishment of three tier PRS throughout the country. As per the provisions of the Act it was mandatory to all the state governments to take necessary steps in establishing PRIs uniformly. A landmark provision of this Act was providing 33% reservation to women in total seats in PRIs. In the opinion of experts the women reservation policy adopted by Karnataka Government in 1983 stood as an example on the basis of which 1993 Act provided for 33% reservation. Women reservation is applicable to the posts of president and vice president of PRIs as well, on rotation basis.

The government of Karnataka passed a new Panchayat Raj Act formulated on the pattern of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional amendment Act on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1993. Thus, the Panchayat Raj system in Karnataka has passed through several stages over the years and now it has become a strong institution.

When an attempt is made to refer to Indian history regarding political representation of women, it can be found that here and there women have participated in independence movement and sometimes in social movement. In comparison with men, participation by women in considerable negligible. It is only after independence that

women’s representation in public life increased and this is because of the promotional measures undertaken by the government of India with a view to drawing women to public life. A significant measure in this regard is extension of reservation facility to women to gain political representation for which purpose the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the constitution of India are regarded as a landmark. This has gone a long way in giving strength to women and it is believed that representation given to women as it depends upon other variables.

This article throws light on the following issues with a view to ascertain the implications of political representation to women reservation 1. Whether the process of women empowerment through her representation is moving in the right direction. 2. Whether the women representatives have been successful in making use of the opportunities provided to them. 3. If not why? What are the factors that impede effective participation by women representatives? 4. To see whether the strong plea for reservation for women in augmenting their all-round development is justified.

### **Empirical Studies and Findings**

From this backdrop this article seeks to present findings of an empirical study of the elected women members of the panchayat raj institutions in Shimoga district of Karnataka. The study covered one Zilla Panchayat, three taluk Panchayat Samitis (Shimoga, Sagar and Hosnagar) and fifteen gram panchayats (five gram panchayats in each taluk panchayats mentioned above). The taluk panchayats have been selected on the basis of development indicators and gram panchayats are selected on random sampling basis. 988 women members, 106 male members, 117 village people and 17 officials were interviewed to get the insight into the actual working of women representatives in these bodies.

As majority of the women members themselves admit this representation is nothing more than nominal representation. In reality they do not have chance or freedom to exercise powers or to enjoy the benefits arising from representation due to the prevailing rural Socio-economic setup and other impediments. However, this explanation is only partly true. The important causes for representation being only nominal are, lack of education among women, absence of courage and boldness, prevalence of shyness and inhibition, familial responsibilities and complexities, limited mobility etc. As a result women members have not succeeded in taking proactive participation in the administrative and developmental affairs of PRIs.

In addition to these factors the professions held by women members also have their impact on their political participation. Out of total elected women members as much as 50% members are engaged in agriculture-having their own land or working as agricultural labourers. Accordingly they have to primarily concentrate on their work which gives them livelihood and sustain them. Naturally they cannot find time for active participation in PRI activities. Few male members who are either agricultural labourers or paid workers will also face the same problems.

When women members participate in PRI full body and standing committee meetings they are expected to give importance to all issues. An observation of this fact reveals that about 75% of women members show keen interest in issues governing the community i.e, the general interests. It is further observed that there is no awareness among

majority of women members about their rules and responsibilities. They have not yet recognized the significance of taking active participation in PRIs and standing committee meetings as well as their activities.

It is not surprising to note, in the Indian societal and familial setup, that more than 80% of women members are subject to influence by their spouses, family members and relatives and it is under the influence of these people that they participate in the deliberations of PRIs. They do not have any kind of freedom of participation in reality. Women members also admit that they do not perform voluntarily on their own and express no aversion or resentment to the pressure exerted by these people. They admit the fact that they were not at all desirous of contesting the election but were forced to do so by their spouses, family members and relatives. It is evident from the data furnished previous chapters, that only very few women members have contested the election out of their voluntary will and desire. It is quite but natural that through women member's family members and relatives pokes their noses in PRI deliberations and interferes in all activities unnecessarily.

An attempt has been made to know the accountability of women members in discharging their duties at all levels of PRIs. It is to be noted that about 85% of women members openly admit that they are accountable and answerable to the public in general and their electorate in particular. The remaining 15% women members take pride in being accountable and answerable to the other elected members, officials, family members and unspecified persons. It was informed by about 70% of women members that they pass on all information regarding their participation in PRI meetings, decision taken thereon etc. to the village community. However, the village community doesn't seem to have a similar view. In the opinion of villagers only 30% of women members convey everything to village people. In the opinion of villagers a large majority of women members have failed grossly in discharging their duties and responsibilities.

After being elected there should be no discrimination in the level of performance of male members and female members as all the elected members have equal rights and opportunities. Yet women members lag far behind in terms of their performance and add to the fact that they can not function and perform as efficiently as their counterparts do. In all about 80% of women members have low ability to compete with male members and do not perform as efficiently as male members. The obvious reasons for this inability to perform well are many. Most women members are subject to external pressures and obligations and these reduce their ability to perform.

It appears that getting elected as a member to PRI does not mean to have gained awareness of PRI system, their activities, general body meeting and standing committee meetings. This holds good to a large chunk of women members of PRIs selected for research study. Almost 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of women amounting to 30% have no idea as to why they have become members, what they have got to do in the meetings of PRIs as well as standing committees what they have got to do in the meetings etc. It is no wonder that lack of awareness may be a factor for their irresponsibility and non-confident of themselves. These factors kill their initiative and they become timid and inactive.

The efforts were made to know how women performed as Presidents and Vice Presidents of PRIs have not given a

rosy picture. Even here their performance seems to be far from satisfactory. More than 70% respondents have unhesitatingly affirmed that women members have not performed well as Presidents and Vice Presidents and that their involvement in active politics in the form of participation is significantly low. They cannot discharge their duties effectively as Presidents and Vice Presidents because of reasons shown below. 1. Prevalence of male dominated social system, 2. Customs and conventions, 3. Shyness and inhibition, 4. Lack of free mobility etc. It is not wise to generalize that all women as presidents and vice presidents do not have awareness or that they have not realized their responsibilities. They know pretty well the responsibilities and what they are expected to do. Yet they hesitate to take active participation and involvement as they are afraid of being criticized and abused publicly. In fact this fear psychosis is a great demotivation

Although women have become members of PRIs they have not been able to make their presence felt in the village community by involving themselves in other local organizations, social groups and NGOs. When we look at the Socio-economic background of these women members hail from, social rigidities and family commitments it is not surprising to know that more than 75% of women members have not at all become members of any local groups or NGO. Only a few women members have involved themselves very actively in local organizations. In fact it is these members who have been taking full involvement and participating very actively in all activities of PRIs too.

A comparison among women members at different levels of PRIs in the area selected for the study regarding their involvement and participation brings to limelight the following facts. At the outset it can be known that women members at TP and ZP level participate more freely than women members at GP level. It appears that women members at TP and ZP levels have long political standing and it is this background that is responsible for their active participation and involvement.

### **Suggestions and concluding remarks**

On the basis of the foregone discussion, it can be observed that although women have tended to enhance their political participation through political representation yet they have to go a long way to take a more responsible and active role. It is true that they have potential. They have been provided with opportunity. They can definitely perform better than what they do today. The following suggestions are offered as remedial measures to overcome the hurdles discussed earlier.

1. Necessary knowledge must be provided to women members so that they can realize the significance of political representation granted to them.
2. Steps should be taken to reduce the intensity of the problem of sex discrimination so that women members can become more confident
3. It has been observed that by and large women members are confronted with the problem of mobility and on account of this factor they have not been able to take active participation in PRI activities on a regular basis. To mitigate this problem it is advisable to provide women members with appropriate and timely conveyance facilities. Undoubtedly this increases the efficiency and performance level.
4. By nature women are timid and not freely mixing in

- their nature and approach. They hesitate to freely participate in meetings in which men are present. Women also hesitate to express and participate freely in PRI activities in a set up where almost all the panchayat secretaries are men. The intensity of this issue can be nullified and women members may be made to give up hesitation and shyness by creating an atmosphere in which more number of women are appointed as panchayat officials and secretaries.
5. A large number of the sitting women members in PRIS are either with no education or with less education. Accordingly, they do not know the fundamentals of PRIs. Therefore, it is very essential to ensure women literacy and provide necessary education.
  6. All efforts must be made to see that women members are prompted to take pro-active role in PRI activities. For this purpose, women members must be provided with such training which enhances their understanding of administrative setup and rules and regulations governing the PRIs.
  7. At present women members are being given training in groups. These programmes have not yielded the desired results. Therefore, there is a need to change the training schedule. Training on specific issues must be given to women members either individually or in small groups and the most essential requirement is that there must be personal and direct contact between the persons offering training and women members in all training programmes. This helps a lot in addressing very specific and delicate issues in which women need sufficient training.
  8. Women empowerment is a collective effort. The feeling must come from within. This necessitates the process of unification. Efforts must be made to bring unity among women members and they must be prompted to fully involve in all activities of PRIs in general and issues concerned with women in particular collectively. As of now more than 90% of women members have not realized the strength that unity and collective bargaining can bring. As such they do not represent or raise any issue collectively. This has slowed down the phase of women empowerment process.

In conclusion it may be remarked that women must get greater social and political exposure so that they can be dynamic in active politics. If they take active participation they can contribute a lot to the all-round development of their regions. All these observations should not lead us to a negative conclusion about the very policy of reservation to women. It has opened many opportunities to them in terms of participation and to fight against negative impact of patriarchy.

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