

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PANCHAYATI RAJ IN RAJASTHAN

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper analyses the issues and opportunities faced by the women in their political career in the state of Rajasthan. Similar to other nations in the world, in India too, the women community are underrepresented in all position of politics, even if they are approximately around half the population of this nation. Ours is a representative democracy and in that, all sectors of the society should have equal and appropriate representation in policy making.'

After the 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution in 1993, local level governments through India were created. The amendment helped create a uniform 3-tier governance at the district level, at the block level and at the village level in rural parts of the nation. It was noticed that women from all walks of their lives participated in the local politics. However, in Rajasthan, there were some sort of hindrances in regards to the women's entry into politics even at the local level that can be identified. They were in the form of family issues or dynasty politics scenario, spouse and education. Through this paper the author throws light on the different ways of representation by women in Rajasthan's local politics and subsequently analyses the barriers to the entry of women in politics.

INTRODUCTION:

Empowerment of women in all spheres and in particular the political sphere is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the goals of equality, development and peace. The Indian democracy which is more than half a century old has entered the next century. But a large mass of women are kept out of political arena still. There can be no true democracy, or no true people's participation in governance and development without equal and proportional participation of men and women at different levels of decision making. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women.[1] A general acuity in societies around the world is that women's major role is to cook food, take care of the children and the household. Different societies have different social norms and values. In some societies both men and women are assigned specific roles and duties. In most of developing countries, only the reproductive role of women is recognized. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for women to participate in the public sphere of life. Cultural factors therefore offer constraint to women participation in politics. Institutional factors may also impact women's political participation. Electoral system with more seats per district and proportional formula for allocating seats can enhance women's participation. Quota system is another important institutional device that can guarantee a minimum number of women seats-holders in legislature. Women are changing the governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in an unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the constitution that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments or Panchayati Raj Institution System (PRI)[2]. The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in one village, or a larger area such as 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994, and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of the government. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. The percentages of women at various levels of political activity have shifted dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from 4-5 percent before to 25-40 percent after. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience in the governance of civic society. In this way they are making the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.[3]

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of the country, directly or through the freely chosen representatives. A proper representation of women in political affairs will ensure their views and needs reflected in public policies that affect their lives most. Political empowerment can be defined 'as the capacity to influence decision making process, planning, implementation and evaluation by integrating them into the political system'. It implies political participation which includes right to vote, contest, campaign, party membership and representation in political office at all

levels and effectively influences decisions thereby leading to political empowerment'.[4] Political empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. Political empowerment denotes a distinct role for women in the formation of policies and influencing decision-making process by integrating them into the political system. Indian women have had little representation in institutional politics since independence. There was more concern in the last two decades towards increasing women's participation in political institutions thereby leading to empowerment. Affirmative action has been accepted as a means to political empowerment.[5] Leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance.

WOMEN AND PANCHAYATI RAJ:

Political Empowerment of women starts with the active participation of women in political institutions. The grass-root level democracy entails due importance to initial participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Even though in today's political system where some reservations have been provided to women in local bodies, that has been misused by some i.e. women have been used as rubber-stamps. Actual decision are being taken by their male family members. Women may have stormed the male bastion under the Panchayati Raj system, but in many cases it is the husbands or male members of their families calling their shots. Elected women representatives have reportedly been reduced to proxies of their male relatives. Such system of de facto rule by male counterparts have to be checked and due importance has to be given to women in PRIs. Political system and decision making process is seen clearly in the changes incorporated in the Panchayati Raj Institution. The objective of bringing improvement in the socio-economic condition of women could be successful only by taking suitable initiatives and measures for empowering them. Empowerment of women will not be possible unless they are provided proper representation in the political system. This objective should be achieved at desired level through making the provision of linking and associating maximum number of women in political affairs even at the lowest level of political activity. In recently introduced Panchayati Raj Institutions, the policy for reservation in favour of women has therefore, been thought as an important approach to maximize their participation in the local level. [6]

POLITICAL SYSTEM AND DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN THE ACTIVITIES OF RURAL AREA

In 1993, the Government of India passed the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act creating local governments across India. It created a uniform three tier system of governance at district, block and village level in rural areas. It provided for mandatory elections every 5 years. The amendment transferred power to the panchayats on twenty-nine subjects. It also reserved seats for women and other marginal groups. Decentralisation was expected to promote local decision making based on participation, transparency and accountability[7].

Rajasthan, the focus of our enquiry remains one of the poorest states in India. Despite large scale social development programmes it has poor social, economic and political indices. It has an unfavourable sex ratio and even poorer child sex ratio of 909 females per 1000 males as per the 2001 census. Female literacy rate is 44 as compared to 76 among men. It has a poor health record with high infant, child and maternal mortality. 57 percent of women are married before they complete 18 years. The practice of sati and its celebration still continues in many parts of the state. Fewer women hold political power, which is manifest in the six percent women's membership in the Rajasthan state legislature, and two women parliamentarians. Fewer women vote compared to men, and their choices are often dictated by men. Inadequate information affects their choice; and criminalisation of politics has worked to deter women from participating actively in politics. As against this, Rajasthan was the first state to implement the Right to Information Act. The state has passed progressive legislations to ensure greater representation of women, to create spaces for enabling women's participation and to protect the offices held by women and marginal groups[8].

"Under the 73rd amendment of constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution, one third of the total seats for scheduled caste, backward class, scheduled tribes and general caste women members in Grampradhan of village Panchayat, Block Panchayat, District Panchayat are reserved for women candidate. Conceptually, providing representation to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions could be accepted as an important planning approach regarding minimizing the traditional felling of people about the status of women in our society, particularly in terms of keeping women under the subjugation of men, imposing restrictions by the households and society against them in the availing of certain opportunities and several other social, cultural and traditional bindings disfavours them for improving personal life style and status in existing social and economic setting." [9] Consequently this newly introduced policy would enhance the possibilities of increasing equalities in the process of socio-economic development, participation in different activities in mutual understandings, status and role to play in the house hold and the activities performed outside households and different decision making processes of the family among men and women. Factors such as the attitude and intention of elected

women towards the initiation of various development programmes and capacity in making efforts in linking different segments of village population with the introduced programmes also matter very much in improving the status of women representatives in the social environment of the village Panchayats. As a consequence this process would lead to increase and strength of empowerment of women.[10]

WOMEN ENTERING POLITICS IN RAJASTHAN

In Rajasthan at the local level there are three distinct typologies of women's path to politics that can be identified – family/dynasty, spouse and education. The first group includes women who could enter politics through dynasty. Having the family in politics they are able to influence the decision making process. They are also able to decide on the development agenda and on the issues to be taken up for discussion. More women elected representatives had family members who were associated with politics. 28 percent men and 34 percent women elects belonged to families that were associated with politics. Banswara had the largest proportion of men and women elected representatives who had families with political linkage. This association has encouraged women to contest the local level elections. 10 percent of the women had father, father-in-law or brother in politics. These family members were active at the panchayat level as ward panches or sarpanches[11].

In the second group belong the women who have entered local politics through spouse's linkage with politics. In many cases they contested the election from the seat which was previously held by the spouse. When the seat got classified as a women's seat, the wife was asked to contest the election. This is about retaining control over politics within the family and can be seen as extension of patriarchy to the political arena. In 5 percent cases the women interviewed had husbands who were in politics for a long time[12].

At the local level there are very few women who had entered politics through higher education and been accepted as an effective local leader.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS

Decentralisation in India created a number of deliberative spaces like gram sabha, panchayat meetings, ward sabhas, mahila gram sabhas and village committees. Gram sabhas have been recognised as the foundation stone of 'direct democracy'. The gram sabha is a constitutionally guaranteed space provided by the State to the citizens to ask questions, seek clarifications, 'voice' their demand, and find local solutions to their issues[13]. In addition to this, "The Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 also makes provisions for ward sabhas, mahila gram sabhas, panchayat meetings and village level standing committees. There is a prescribed quorum for both ward sabha and gram sabha. If the quorum is not complete then the meeting is adjourned for a later time and date. However in the meeting called thereafter, the requirement does not hold." [14]

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN GRAM SABHA

Gram sabhas are generally held in January and August of each year. A typical gram sabha is facilitated by a gram sevak, mostly men. It is usually organised in front of the Panchayat office or the village community hall. The officials and the gram sevak usually sit on a raised platform or on chairs facing the community. The only woman seated with the officials is the sarpanch. Women are not comfortable sitting with the gram sevaks and officials from the various departments. Women from the community usually sit at the back while men sit in the front rows. The dalits sit together usually on the side, with the women. Government officials do not respond to queries raised by them. Questions are raised on their behalf and answers given through the influential men sitting in the front.[15]

PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYAT MEETINGS

Panchayat meetings were observed of which 25 were presided over by women sarpanches. A typical panchayat meeting held at the panchayat office, would start around 11 am and go on till 4pm. The gram sevak and the sarpanch, if attending the meeting, would be present throughout the meeting. The ward panches generally attend the meeting for some time, put their proposals and leave. Members from the community also attend the meeting and submit their concerns and preferences in writing or orally. These are recorded by the gram sevak. Very often the signatures of the participants are taken after leaving a couple of pages blank to write the proceedings and even points that are not discussed in the meeting. In panchayats headed by men, although the sarpanches chaired the meetings and expressed their views, the gram sevak was 'in-charge' of the proceedings and they jointly facilitated the meeting. In majority of the cases where the sarpanch is a woman she was not able to play an active role in facilitating and conducting the meeting, which was done instead by male representatives or the gram sevak. Several cases were observed where the gram sevak, sarpanch's husband/son officiated on her behalf in her absence and even when she was present.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

Agencies within the civil society and local associations, especially women's groups, have been working to create and secure space within the decentralised governance system for women's participation, especially those from the disadvantaged sections. However, once women enter the spaces provided by decentralisation, various factors hinder participation ranging from fundamental inequalities, male-dominated governance structures, family, caste, personal background and the local governance system and institutions. Alongside the barriers, there have also been efforts to enable women's participation. The support has come from civil society groups, local associations, and self-help groups. The capacity building initiatives of the civil society have focused on enabling women to contest and once in, to provide specific support and build their skills as per their needs. Mobilisation and networking have helped them to collectively demand enabling environments through advocating in appropriate forums.[16]

Other major barriers includes:

1. **Women's dependence on their families**– The decision to contest an election for a woman is mostly made by her family largely by her husband or father. Families provide critical support for campaigning, in carrying out public work, day-to-day functioning in the Panchayat and in times of crises, such as the no-confidence motion; especially for women leaders. Men operate autonomously, or consult the village elders and the gram sevaks.
2. **Women's political inexperience**– Women tend to be politically inexperienced as compared to men. While one out of every six men has contested an election, only one out of twenty five women has done so. Women's political inexperience tends to affect negatively, their presence in government meetings and their ability to influence decision making.
3. **The Culture of Politics**– Politics is widely considered as male domain. Men regulate the entry of women into politics. It is spoken of *not being a straight game*, and therefore one where women, who have no experience, should stay away from.
4. **Women's private costs of public action**– Women's decision to contest is frequently made by the men in the family. Even if the family does not make the decision for her, she still needs the approval of her family to contest. The approval comes with conditions.

CONCLUSION:

With the establishment of PRIs in our country a woman gets an opportunity to prove her worth as a good administrator, decision-maker or a good leader. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is a milestone in this regard. It provides women a chance to come forward. This experiment is proving to be a big success particularly by providing opportunity to women to come out of their houses and participate in administrative and political field. It has to be considered that the inclusion of well qualified women in village Panchayati at the initial state of the interlocution of Panchayati Raj Institution in rural areas would be an important instrumental measure in planning for improving social status and empowering women. Women constitute half of the population of our country. It is our duty to encourage the women in such a largest democracy of the world. To give a proper status to the women, Government, NGOs, and Universities have to play a vital role in this field. This group of women, if provided representation at village Panchayati level can strongly rise and handle the issues related to the betterment of women, can play dominant role in decision making process and make suitable recommendation for improving the status of women in the meeting. It creates opportunities for women to exercise more control over design and provisions of services and the management of resources it may benefit. Good number of women competing with the men in local politics, forwarding gender related agendas is looked as a way towards the gender equity.

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