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Reflections on New Partnerships Between Women and Local Self – Government in India: A Rural Revolution?

By Santosh Nandal

Abstract

This essay reflects on strategies for women's empowerment in light of the enactment of the 73rd constitutional amendment, *Panchayati Raj*, in the Indian Constitution, in 1992. It begins with the assumption that women's empowerment implies progressive elimination of gender disparities at the grassroots level. As such, a perspective on women's empowerment differs from ideas about women's development in some important ways. Women's development is primarily a socio-economic concept while women's empowerment is essentially a political project. It is argued here that women's empowerment is indeed a precursor to women's development. The author offers suggestions for increasing women's effectiveness in local government and closes with an evaluation of the last ten years of the manifestation of the constitutional amendment through a case study example.

Key Words: women in India, political participation, Panchayati Raj.

Introduction

This essay reflects on strategies for women's empowerment in light of the enactment of the 73rd constitutional amendment, *Panchayati Raj*, in the Indian Constitution, in 1992. It begins with the assumption that women's empowerment implies progressive elimination of gender disparities at the grassroots level. As such, a perspective on women's empowerment differs from ideas about women's development in some important ways. Women's development is primarily a socio-economic concept while women's empowerment is essentially a political project. It is argued here that women's empowerment is indeed a precursor to women's development.

The constitution of India ensures equal rights to both men and women and has special provisions for the welfare of women to enhance their status in society. But still, after, 56 years of independence, women representatives in politics have been negligible. To fill this vacuum, the government of India amended the constitution to empower women at local levels. The purpose behind this move is to provide more opportunities for women to participate in decision making and thereby to increase the possibilities of accruing more benefits of development to rural areas.

The Indian government's decision reflects the challenges in achieving gender equity. According to Mahbub ul Haq (1996), equity and empowerment are essential components of human resource development. Equity in access to opportunities demands a fundamental restructuring of power in many societies. It includes equalization of political opportunities through voting rights reform, campaign finance reform, and other actions aimed at limiting the excessive political power of a feudal minority. The human development paradigm envisages full empowerment of all people such that they are in a position to exercise choices of their own free will. "It implies a political democracy in which people can

influence decision about their lives. It means decentralization of power so that real governance is brought to the doorstep of every person. It means that all members of civil society participate fully in making and implementing decisions” (WDR, 2001). Women’s empowerment would permit them to compete on an equal footing with men.

Gender discrimination has been identified as one of the pervasive forms of institutionalized deprivation. Panchayati Raj assumes particular importance as a means of producing democratic functioning and decision making through decentralized governmental power, thereby restructuring political institutions. The recent constitutional amendment prescribes a structured form of decentralized governance and decision making by emphasizing statutory participation of women at grassroots level organizations. This study thus reflects on women in India’s local self-government (Panchayati Raj), focusing on the emerging gender perspectives that can change the status of women in India through political participation.

Panchayati Raj

Panchayati Raj, the Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 has reserved thirty three percent of its seats for women in Panchayats (grassroots level local government institutions) and Municipal bodies (urban local bodies). The purpose behind this move is to provide more opportunities for women to participate in decision making and thereby to increase the possibilities of accruing more benefits of development to rural areas. Panchayate Raj, as a system of governance at the grassroots level in rural India, has been rightly conceived as the most viable and proper mechanism of realizing goals of democracy and decentralization. It is now almost a decade since Panchayati Raj in India was not only constitutionalized in the true sense of the term but also given a status which instigated a debate on ‘district government’ and the creation of the third tier of federal polity in India. Likewise, the empowerment of women, through a well-devised system of reservation, has not only brought about a change in socio-political culture but has also led to a virtual transformation of the rural scene where people have increasingly become aware of their rights and have started demanding their share in power. As a result, can we conclude that rural India today has become the embodiment of a new revolution, one which redirects the polity rendering democracy and decentralization vibrant and feasible for women? I will argue that In India, the process of politically empowering women through reservation in the local elected bodies has broadly mobilized women.

Historical Background

Women are virtually excluded from political power all over the world. Although women constitute half of the population, only 3.5 percent of the world’s cabinet ministers are women, and women hold no ministerial positions in 93 countries. All political systems, regardless of ideology or form, routinely deny women formal political status. As a writer and researcher Maxine Molyneux (1994) observed, “Politics, more than any other realm, has remained largely a monopoly of men because its condensation of power and authority mainly lies in the hand of this gender”. The facts of this statement can be easily observed by looking at

the miniscule percentage of women occupying political power in every country of the world. As per Human Development Report (1999) women hold only 12.7 percent of the world's parliamentary seats and only 8.7 percent of those in the least developed countries. As a consequence, political women are seen as the deviants, the trespassers or the guests in a terrain, which does not fundamentally belong to them. In India, too, electoral politics continues to remain a male preserve, both empirically and symbolically. Male voters have consistently outnumbered women voters by 11 per cent over the last five elections although this gap is narrowing. Sociologists consider that only 30 per cent of female voters are 'aware voters' (Prem Chowdhary, 1994). That such a term is rarely used to describe uninformed male voters only indicates that politics is still considered male territory. In fact, when women cast their votes in India, there is a de facto pattern whereby women first take advice from male family members, suggesting that they are incapable of arriving at a reasoned decision on their own.

Fewer women contest political positions than do men. On average, there have been three women candidates for every 100 male contestants in past elections. Only 200 of the 9,107 candidates contesting in the 1989 Parliamentary elections of India were women. Though major political parties now promise to reserve 33 per cent of their seats for women, their record shows otherwise. In the 1999 elections, women comprised 9.9 percent of Congress party candidates, 6.6 percent of BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party) candidates, 5.5 percent of CPI / CPI (M) (Communist Party of India / Communist Party of India-Marxist) candidates, and 3.4 percent of Janata Dal Party (people's party) candidates.

Lower participation ensures that women remain under-represented in politics at all levels. Before India's independence, women constituted 10 percent of those jailed for protesting British Rule, the pivotal form of political activity at that time. Since then, women have never held more than 8 per cent of seats in Lok Sabha, even though in absolute terms the number of women Members of Parliament has risen from 22 in 1951 to 45 in 1999.

If women are marginalized in politics at national and state levels, they are practically absent in villages, which are more tradition bound. All women panchayats at the village level – the subject of this paper are clearly an anomaly in a country where women have so little political power. The importance of creating women's panchayats at the village level received formal recognition in the mid-seventies when the Committee on the Status of Women in India recommended the establishment of statutory women's panchayats at village level. This was seen as a transitional measure to ensure greater participation by rural women in the political process.

This recommendation coincided with the growing worldwide recognition of the need for women to participate in politics. Although the United Nations had adopted a convention on the political rights of women as early as 1952, this issue had received little real attention. In 1985, the Declaration at the World Conference of Women in Nairobi, noted that 'for true equality to become a reality for women, the sharing of power on equal terms with men must be a major strategy'. This gave some impetus to the critical issue of women's political participation.

In India, too, the women's movement has given little priority to women's participation in electoral politics until relatively recently. The movement has yet to evolve a coherent position or a coordination strategy on this issue, but there have been a few isolated regional initiatives in this area. Some groups, including the National Commission of Women had earlier called for the reservation of seats for women. A few women's groups such as the voluntary organization 'Vimochana' located in the city of Bangalore, were active in campaigning against politicians in the 1989 general elections, and many women's groups in various cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore prepared manifestos in the 1980s.

Thus, the theme of 'Women and Politics' has emerged as an important issue only in this decade. This theme was discussed at the 1990 National Conference held at Kozhikode in the state of Kerala. The possibility of forming a woman's party was also touched on. A few networks have since been formed around the issue of women's political participation. But autonomous women's groups still remain uncertain whether a continuing struggle within formal political structures is more effective than the struggle for women's rights from outside the system.

In this vacuum, government enactments have provided the greatest fillip to the issue of women's participation in electoral politics. Although both Karnataka and Maharashtra, two states of India, reserved seats for women at the local and state levels in the eighties, it wasn't until 1992, with the constitutional amendment, that the issue of women's political participation has been brought sharply into national focus. More than 800,000 women's groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are currently engaged in researching, documenting and training women to enter electoral politics. This study hopes to contribute and feed into this ongoing process.

Constitutional Provision

Prior to the current amendment, parliamentary committees had made some suggestions regarding the integration of women into the polity. The Balwant Ray Mehta Committee suggested that in the constitution of Panchayats, there should be a provision for the co-option of two women members and one member from each scheduled cast and scheduled tribe. The Ashok Mehta committee recommended that the two women securing the highest number of votes among the women candidates in the election could take the seats reserved for them. However, in these Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) the seats reserved have been so low that women can hardly influence the political process. Only one or two women were co-opted in a group of 15 to 19 members. It is disheartening to note that PRIs which were introduced in 1959, even now have been able to influence women to become members. Women were essentially 'show pieces' in the institutions whose voices could never be heard.

The present Panchayati Raj differs from the early pattern of women's panchayat at the village level. One, the earlier Panchayati Raj was not a political institution but only an implementing body. Elections to panchayat bodies were held on an individual basis, and the candidates contesting for elections were not nominated by the political parties. The 73rd constitutional amendment act allows parties to enter into the election fray. Second, the present Panchayati Raj is not

implementing body to the development programs. It is a decision making body and rules over the governance of the village. A very important aspect of the new Panchayati Raj is that it empowers women and weaker sections of villages in the wielding of power. The general view is that women in India are showing signs of political awakening but their progress is hindered by illiteracy, domestic pressure, and dependency on men. By and large, a few women who have emerged significantly into political prominence are those who are 'economically well off' and who belong to the upper strata of society.

The constitutional provisions no doubt ensure the representation of women in PRIs both as members and as functionaries, but it must be kept in mind that merely becoming members does not ensure their effectiveness. Secondly, even though the representation is based on an elective process, it is not always the case that capable and active women come through these reservations. In some cases, the women who are relatives of the existing local leaders may get elected to fill up these reservation seats. Somehow this system appears to discourage competent women from contesting the elections. The conservative nature of rural areas, the lack of education and access to media, poor exposure to the outside world, the patriarchal nature of the family, economic dependency on men etc. make the women of rural areas powerless and unequipped to participate effectively in the political process. Though reservation appears to be the only way to ensure the presence of women in PRIs, having secured their presence there, an agenda for action must evolve to ensure their effective participation in the PRIs and through them, in the process of decision making at the grassroots level. Below are a series of recommendations.

Training

Once the election is over, women who are elected to the PRIs should receive training for their new office. Training should be a participatory process. The participants should be encouraged to draw political ideas from their own experiences as well as those of others. Ultimately, women will need to acquire a new set of values, behavior patterns, attitudes, and methods of work and begin to make qualitative decisions about themselves, their homes and their communities. Stifled by oppressive and controlling patriarchal relations, rural women are often burdened by heavy work and encouraged to think not about themselves but about their husbands and families first. The program must also impart essential information to women to carry out their responsibilities as panchayat leaders. Effective participation of women in the PRIs and its usefulness for women's rights and development will not materialize if the 'Panchayati Raj' system itself does not operate in a democratic and meaningful way.

Political Participation

The readiness and willingness of the people to participate in the political process is a basic requirement for a democracy. However, low literacy rates and limited mass communication alienate a large sector of the populace and need to be increased to help draw a larger number of women into the political mainstream. "Political participation" means the involvement of citizens in activities aimed at

influencing government's decision directly or indirectly. Political participation aims at pressuring the panchayat to maximize the allocation of resources for the benefit of women.

The central purpose of the participatory process is the awakening of women panchayat members' dormant energies and unleashing of their creative powers. The process of conscientization, or the emerging awareness of one's previously stifled creativities, should also be an objective in women's political participation. Conscientization leads to self organization as means of undertaking initiatives.

Organizing Self-help Groups

Panchayat members can play the role of change agents, facilitators, group organizers and catalysts. Such groups, perhaps comprised of women from shared socioeconomic backgrounds, would provide a forum for dialogue, analysis and reflection, thereby contributing to the capacity to the members to understand and find solutions to their problems. Second, membership in a group would reduce individual insecurities and dependencies and build confidence. Third, the groups could provide a mechanism for discussion, choice and elaboration of social and economic activities to be undertaken on individual or joint bases. Fourth, groups serve as one mechanism for the poor to transform their individual weaknesses into collective strengths thus enhancing their bargaining power vis-à-vis other economic groups and exerting countervailing pressure against the local power structure.

Small group meetings are ideal forums not only for developing collective strength, unity, bargaining capacity, support and confidence, but also for the socio-economic, political and legal advancement of rural poor women through women's own efforts. Removing ignorance by dissemination of information and raising general awareness among the toiling villagers is possible through group meetings. The realization of their capabilities, potentialities and role in society would strengthen their self image and would foster them with confidence to take action in life on their own.

If permanent changes are to take place in the status of women that give them control over their income, autonomy and self confidence, women must have access to intervention programs (such as micro-credit organizations). Alternatively, they themselves can organize to run income generating activities on their own but they must be supported by structural and institutional changes that allow them access to skill, leadership, decision making and economic independence.

Empowerment of Women in Haryana

Consequent to the enactment of the Seventy Third Amendment in the Constitution, the Punjab Gram Panchayat Act, 1952 and Punjab Panchayat Samities and Zila Parishad Act, 1961 were amended to implement the provision regarding the reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj, the three tier structure of local government in rural areas. The revised provisions are provided for the reservation of thirty three percent of the seats for women in the Gram Panchayat (GP) (village level local government), the Panchayat Samiti (PS) (intermediate (Block) level local government) and Zila Parishad (ZP) (district level

local government). The outcome of these provisions is reflected in the table given below following table.

Table 1: Reservation of Seats for Women

Local institutions	Total no. of Seats	No. of Seats Reserved for women
Gram Panchayat	61,170	20,390
Panchayat Samiti	2,118	706
Zilla parishad	303	103

Table 2: Reservation of Offices for Women

Local Institutions	No. of Positions	Positions Reserved
Gram Panchayat	5,958	1,986
Panchayat Samiti	108	36
Zilla Parishad	20	7

In addition, one third of offices of the chairpersons of the subject committees have also been reserved for women. Thus, the women who were insignificant at the grassroots level parties became substantial power wielders overnight due to the reformation provisions of the 73rd amendment in the Indian Constitution.

Case Study

The author researched nine case studies of village panchayat (which are headed by Women Sarpanch women heading the village council) in the belt of Rohtak District. The findings of the case studies are as follows:

(1) There was a lot of resistance from the male members of the village, as expected, due to their loss of power and significant positions in the affairs of the village. They adopted obstructive practices and created difficulties for the women Sarpanch (head of village). They also took advantage of women's ignorance regarding the procedural matters. The village Level Workers (VLW), and the government functionary joined hands with male-members and made it almost impossible for the Sarpanch to administer the village affairs.

(2) The women members were quick learners and learnt the procedural details and other rules of the game within a couple of months. The women Sarpanch, after the initial hesitation and indecision, were able to conduct meetings of the village

council effectively. They secured the support of some of the well-meaning members and thereby have their effective say in the decision making.

(3) Women members had their own agenda and priorities which included provision of drinking water, sanitation facility, immunization for children, implementation mother-child care program, primary education to ensure that females complete school, construction of roads, repair of chaupals (public meeting places), arrangement of street lights etc. They also tackled the menace of alcoholism by making the 'Gram Sabha' (village assembly) have a resolution, requesting the state government to impose prohibition in their village. They also became aware of and attempted to limit the sources of corruption at the village level.

(4) Women members are in favor of girl's education. They categorically said they did not want to send their girls for schooling outside the village due to insecure environments in co-educational schools, as well as on the way to them.

(5) Women members sought assistance from the male members in their families to overcome these difficulties. Initially they felt inadequate and dependent on men in their families for guidance and economic support. For instance, to attend the meetings or going outside of the village they have to ask for even the bus fare from their husbands or the male members of the household.

(6) Although women are elected representative of panchayats, they feel neglected. They said that they did not receive communication from the gram panchayat to attend the meetings. Male pardhans and husbands of some women pardhans (Head of village) did not allow the women to attend the training camps as they did not want them to learn about their rights and powers. That is why some villages invitation letters for attending the meetings were not distributed among the elected women representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Women of middle and higher casts realized that they were merely place holders because, although elected, the de facto power rests with the male members of the family and in the case of scheduled caste women (lower caste), it rests with the dominant castes although it is formally exercised through their husbands.

(7) The bureaucracy has not cooperated in assisting the women. Male members of the government bureaucracy feel to the elected representatives of the panchayats. The women representatives also said that whenever they go to the office they find no female support as only males are employed.

(8) These women seemed determined to bring about comprehensive development of their villages and to overcome the difficulties created by their male counterparts. The male members had to reconcile to the fact that women Sarpanch is a reality and that they are capable of shouldering the responsibilities.

(9) Rural women as a group started showing a keen interest in learning more about Panchayat administration and community development. These changes among women brought respectability for them in the community. With the help of field

staff they started taking initiatives to solve problems in the community. The women acquired the confidence to share the experiences and also to learn from their peers. They were encouraged to meet higher authorities of the government and present their problems before them.

(10) The women members realized that the funds available to the village Panchayat were inadequate. With a view to augment the resources they tapped the state funds by sourcing the development schemes. They managed to secure funds to the extent of Rupees 50,000 (\$ 1,000) per annum by implementing the Rural Unemployment Eradication Program. They also convinced the village community to enhance the resources by the increasing the prevailing rates and taxes.

(11) With the introduction of the Panchayati Raj the greatest change that has come about due to women in the decision making process is in the socioeconomic conditions of villages. It is the women, for example, who are most affected when they have to walk six kilometers for a bucket of water. So, as panchayat members women make maximum efforts to ensure easy access to safe, potable water. Thus, there has been an infrastructural change. On many occasions, elected women have provided the leadership for organizing women so that their legitimate demands may be fulfilled including widow pensions and gas connections, among others.

In sum, there is a growing realization among the women that local elections are a means of bringing positive change in their lives. They are motivated to change the traditions. These women seemed determined to bring about comprehensive development of their village and to overcome the difficulties created by their male counterparts. The male members had to reconcile to the fact that women Sarpanch is a reality and they are capable of shouldering the responsibilities. In a nutshell, we can say that the empowerment and participation of women in the affairs of villages bodes well for the development of the village community.

Prospects for the Future

The above evaluation reflects on the difficulties that women power wielders have to face owing to the obstructionist attitude of the male folk and their dependence on them, owing the lack of experience. However, after assuming power, the women office bearers learn fast the rules of the game. In a decade after the amendment, women are performing their duties independently. They are also determining priorities in their villages. There is a wind of change in the Panchayats as these women act as “agents of change”. These are excellent prospects for women to play a significant role in Panchayati Raj of India in the years to come.

Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at International Association for Feminist Economics, 12-14 July, 2002 held at Occidental College, Los Angeles, California.

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