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Participation of women in rural local governance: A study of background of women leaders in a Desert district of Rajasthan

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Abstract

Rural local governance institutions are considered as partners of the central and state governments in carrying out developmental functions in India. The 73rd constitutional Amendment is a significant in the sense that it has given a constitutional status to rural local governance structures i.e. panchayati Raj institutions in the country. The seminal contribution of the constitutional Amendment is that it has provided mandatory provision of reservation of seats for disadvantaged groups: 33 per cent reservation of seats for women, 15 per cent for the scheduled castes and 7.5 per cent for the scheduled Tribes. In fact, the provision for providing 33 per cent reservation for women at all levels of panchayats is historic particularly if seen in the context of the failure to provide for women's reservation in the Parliament. An attempt has been made in this paper to analyse the data with regard to the socio-economic background of the women leaders manning the rural Local governance structures in the desert district of Rajasthan. The socio-economic and political conditions play an important role in charactering the social life and behaviour of an individual.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, participation, socio-economic background and political participation.

1. Introduction

The 73rd constitutional Amendment to Indian constitution hailed as a landmark in the evolution of democratic decentralization in India mandates the transfer of decision making power along with necessary resources to rural local governance institutions, i.e panchayati Raj institutions (PRI's) in the country. The Amendment has provided one third of the seats for women at all the three levels of PRI's Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla parishad on a revolving basis. One third of all panchayat presidencies are also reserved for women. In addition, seats are reserved for members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in proportion to their population. In all around one million women elected representatives are manning the rural local governance institutions at grass roots level in India. These women leaders are key change agents for new future for India and they are taking up the leadership roles in addressing various issues confronting the rural areas.

Rural local governance institutions are considered as partners of the central and state governments in carrying out developmental functions in India. The 73rd constitutional Amendment is a significant in the sense that it has given a constitutional status to rural local governance structures i.e. panchayati Raj institutions in the country. The seminal contribution of the constitutional Amendment is that it has provided mandatory provision of reservation of seats for disadvantaged groups: 33 per cent reservation of seats for women, 15 per cent for the scheduled castes and 7.5 per cent for the scheduled Tribes. In fact, the provision for providing 33 per cent reservation for women at all levels of panchayats is historic particularly if seen in the context of the failure to provide for women's reservation in the Parliament. An attempt has been made in this paper to analyse the data with regard to the socio-economic background of the women leaders manning the rural Local governance structures in the desert district of Rajasthan. The socio-economic and political conditions play an important role in charactering the social life and behaviour of an individual. Examination of socio-political background of elites engaged in various walks of life has assumed a considerable importance in the studies on Indian polity, which subsumes various levels of Government i.e. the national and local governments. Behind this is a premise that these types of studies will reveal the concentration of power. Some argue that the political power is concentrated in the hands of elites with high level socio-economic status. Others have concluded that power is pluralistic in its distribution and that there are many other

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sources of political influence besides socio-economic elites. Pluralist thinkers argue that political power is a function of widely dispersed resources: political parties, elected officials, bureaucrats and interest group as well as the general public which hold varying amounts of potential power in reference to specific areas of policy. Elitists argue that a small integrated group of wealthy and socially powerful individuals control the policy processes. Elitist literature supports the proposition that socio-economic stratification determines the structure of political power. The nature of leadership however, greatly determined by variables such as age, caste, sex, religion, occupation, education, rural-urban, background, family size, land holding etc. These variables besides giving us an insight in to their personality makeup also enable us to look into their social basis in terms of the dominant class and caste to which they belong. The socio-economic, educational and political background of the leaders would also enable us to anticipate as to what they are capable of doing, what we should expect from them and how well they are equipped to discharge the responsibilities developed upon them by the electorate. The reason for fewer women coming forward to contest elections appears to be prevailing socio-economic conditions and biological make up of women on the one hand and traditional and conservative outlook and general backwardness among the masses on the other. The committee on the status of women recommended the establishment of statutory women panchayats at the village level as a traditional measure to ensure greater participation by women in the political process. The national perspective plan for women dwelt at length on the political participation of women at grass root level democratic institutions. The core group set up by the government of India pointed out that political power and access to position of decision-making and authority are critical pre-requisite for women's equality in the process of nation building. The seventy third constitutional amendments provided one third reservation of seats as well as offices from gram panchayat to zila parishad to women. The following data shows the number of women members in Bikaner:

Table 1.1: The position of Women members in PRI's in the District:

S.NO.	Unit	Member	Sarpanch	Total
1.	ZILLA PARISHAD	8	--	8
2.	P.S. BIKANER	12	22	34
3.	P.S. NOKHA	10	18	28
4.	P.S. LUNKARANS AR	8	12	20
5.	P.S. KOLAYAT	7	12	19
	TOTAL	45	64	109

Study Area and Methodology

The study has been conducted in Bikaner district of Rajasthan state. The district of Bikaner forms part of the Great Indian Desert i.e. The Thar Desert. The study is based on survey research method. There are 109 members in four Panchayat samitis and zilla parishad Bikaner area: 45 women members and 64 women sarpanches. Out of 109 members 86 women members were interviewed for the study based on the random sampling method. Data were collected through both primary as well as secondary sources. The primary sources include interview with the help of schedule. The schedule was administered and data was collected from panchayat samiti and zilla parishad women members in June 2014. The secondary sources include the relevant literature on

panchayati Raj various journals were browsed through, for getting the required information.

Age Pattern

Age determines to a large extent the behaviour and attitude of a person. Traditionally it was the privilege of the elders to occupy important positions in the rural social structures. Respect for age in rural society is the projection of behaviour in a patriarchal family system, where youngsters are supposed to obey their elders who enjoy unquestionable authority of dictation. However, with the change in times, this concept is also changing quite fast. At present we find more number of youngsters occupying the leadership roles. The youth display a greater initiative, courage, and confidence. But their decisions sometimes smack of immaturity and rashness. The old on the contrary, are more cautious, mature and conservative. They are comparatively initiative and lethargic. A favourable choice, therefore, seems to crystallize towards middle age people.

The data revealed that 38 per cent of women panchayat raj leaders belonged to the age group of 36-45 years and 34 per cent in the age group of 26-35 years. It means nearly 72 per cent of the women leaders are below 45 years of age. If we consider 26 to 45 years as young and middle aged, then 72 per cent of women panchayati raj leaders are young and middle aged. This is also a resultant of massive shuffling of elites at the panchayati raj institutions level. This trend is also an indicative of the tide of modernistic forces.

Caste Background

India is a country of inequalities. Caste is the basis on which our whole society is based. At one end of the spectrum we have the out castes named as SCs and STs and on the other end we have the upper caste consisting of the priest, the landlord and the merchant castes. In between there are hundreds other social groups arranged hierarchically by the caste social order. Several among these groups are condemned to backwardness, social, economic and educational because of the humble occupation the caste has ascribed to them.

The largest and politically most dynamic caste in Rajasthan is the Jats. As an economically prosperous agricultural middle caste the Jats have periodically but thus far unsuccessfully, challenged Brahmins and Rajputs for the leadership of congress party.

The Jats in Rajasthan have been upwardly mobile, more educated, prosperous and relatively high up in the human development index. Politically they have been a major beneficiary of democratic politics contributing more than one fourth state legislators and parliamentarians in the Loksabha. They have not hesitated in flexing their muscles from time to time. In spite of all this, their major grievances are inferior social status as compared to the Rajputs. This feeling of social deprivation was responsible for active Jat participation in the Arya Samaj led movements for social equality and justice in the pre-independence period and thereafter too. Another feature of this social backwardness is inadequate Jat representation in the public sector in spite of high literacy rates. As a result of these deprivations perhaps a complex of being used as a vote bank by the congress leadership developed among the community. This complex was effectively converted into a battle for Jat identity by the Jat mahasabha whose leadership is today in the hands of Professional lawyers, doctors and retired bureaucrats. The

data reveals that 30 per cent of women panchayati Raj functionaries belong to schedule caste and schedule tribes. The dominant castes such as Jats and Rajputs constitute 28 per cent and 10 per cent respectively of the women panchayati raj leaders. The other backward Castes (OBC's) constitute 19 per cent of women P.R. leaders. In zilla parishad 67 per cent women leaders belong to Jat community. Rajputs are dominant in Kolayat panchayat samiti area. The reservation of seats for SC's and ST's are responsible for the large number of women representation in the panchayati raj institutions. Equally significant is that SC's and ST's and OBC's also cornered majority of women panchayati raj leadership positions. Caste affects electoral politics in India at all levels and elections in turn have redefined the meaning of caste. The ability of caste leaders to acquire power by the means of cultivating caste vote banks has converted caste identities into effective political weapons. This is most evident in the case of backward castes most of them are economically powerful, socially dominant and numerically large in their respective regions.

Education Background

Education is perhaps the most widely accepted variable among all the socio-economic variables. Education broadens man's outlook, enables him to understand the need for norms of tolerance, restraining him from adhering to extremist doctrines. It also increases his capacity to make rational electoral choices. The data revealed that nearly 77 per cent of the women panchayati raj leaders had education up to primary level. Nearly 13 per cent women panchayati raj leaders mentioned that they had studied up to secondary level. Another 7 per cent women panchayati raj leader mentioned that they studied up to senior secondary level. In India, as in most parts of the Third world women are less educated than men and within the depressed social strata and ethnic minorities the gap is even more pronounced. Meanwhile, the daughters of the rich are flocking to the universities and some of them are leading women liberation movements (imitating their counter parts in affluent countries), which in our country means the liberation of the Privileged. These differences also account for the wide divergences in the way the children of the rich and the poor are brought up, thus perpetuating sharp disparities for generation to come.

Lack of education of women is an important cause of the exploitation of women, which is a marked characteristic of our society. The main basis of this exploitation is economic and it is found at its worst in the lower classes and among scheduled castes- but most of all for women. As a matter of social policy there is need to pay special attention to raising the educational levels of women and mothers from the poor, under privileged and conservative strata of society in order to achieve a major spin off process of social reconstruction.

Religious Background

Religion is a more or less coherent system of beliefs and practices concerning a super natural order of beings, forces, places or other entities; a system that for its adherents has implication for their behaviour and welfare; implications that the adherents in varying degrees and ways take seriously in their private and collective life. India is a multi-religious and multi-lingual country having great cultural diversities. The major religious groups in population are Hindus, Muslims,

Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains. It has been said that the tolerance of diversity has been characteristic features of Hinduism. The test of secularism does not end with toleration of different religions. In fact, an adequate proportion of minorities in different fields of activity strengthen the secular credentials of democracy. Since the country committed to secularism and democracy, it would be appropriated to ascertain whether minorities are adequately represented in the governance of the panchayati raj institutions. It must be emphasized that various religious groups in India especially Hindus, Muslims and Christian are not homogeneous populations. Each one is divided and subdivided into innumerable castes, sects and cultural groups constitute the Muslims. In the fiercely male dominated world of politics reservation were seen as the policy of positive discrimination and the only alternative to help women reach corridors of political power.

The data reveals that an overwhelming majority i.e. 98 per cent of the panchayati raj leaders are Hindus and the remaining 2 per cent leaders belong to Islam religion. In Bikaner one can find the following religious groups: Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists. Except Hindus, the other religious groups in the districts are not properly represented.

With the Hindus accounting for 98 per cent, the salience of caste as an explanatory factor would be relatively higher. Generally speaking, caste hierarchy is a function of ritual-cum-secular status. The severity of pollution norms (determining ritual hierarchy), however, is not the same everywhere. Much depended upon the relative impact of reform movements and modernization.

Family Background

Family is the primary social unit of a society having universal existence. It is a small residential kin group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and production. Family performs important functions like socialization, feeling of belongingness, transmission of culture to the sibs, the psychological protection to the young ones, provides emotional and sentimental ties, social control and division of labour among its members for social and economic existence. The most common types of families are nuclear and joint. A nuclear family typically consists of a man, his wife and off springs, although in individual cases one or more additional persons may reside with them. On the other hand a joint family is a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common worship and are related to each other as some particular type of kindred.

The data reveals that 64 per cent of women members of panchayati raj institutions are members of a joint family and the remaining 36 per cent have nuclear families. In almost all peasant societies of the world agriculture has been co-extensive with the extended family. Agriculture in itself is not a month's job. It involves an active co-operation of many persons. This collective effort has got institutionalized through support from the extended family. The family owns agricultural land collectively and each member of the family, whether male or female, child or adult, young or old is associated with agricultural operations at different stages. In the Indian society, this general norm has found its expression in the institution of joint family. In spite of regional variations in the forms which joint family has taken

throughout the length and breadth of India, it has been the major organization for the land owning class, which in the Indian context has largely the upper castes. And the low castes, which are at the same time, the landless and agricultural labourers have largely constituted a lower economic class in Indian situation. The economic subservience of the lower castes has been ritually sanctified under the guise of caste hierarchy and the Jaj-mani system. Poor economic status has contributed to the fragmentation of the family in the low caste.

In Hindu society occupation is closely related to caste. Just as an individual is born in to a caste, he is also assigned with certain specific role within which he has to function. Each caste has a specific occupation, which is predetermined and each caste is a specialized occupational group. In the ideal situation, there is occupational monopoly. If the traditional occupation is not very much remunerative it may either be given up and substituted by another occupation or supplemented by secondary occupation, which is not determined to the individual concerned or the community. Today, the majority of castes do not exclusively carry out either the traditional occupations or the secular occupations. The choice of new occupations and the rejection of old ones is pragmatic and selective in character. There are castes that have discarded traditional occupations because they were considered impure or unclean because of the stigma about the polluting nature of their traditional occupations.

Studies on elites in India revealed that political recruitment has been based on certain occupations. The two major occupations from which politicians were found to be emerging are Journalism and law. S.M. Lipset observed that in the political life of the nation as a whole...leaders are recruited mainly from occupations which themselves require political skills, largely those of organization and communication. The legal profession is the one which best trains its members in such skills. Very commonly politicians of the larger society are more than likely to be drawn from what Max Weber perceptively termed as the 'dispensable' occupations like those of law and Journalism. Such occupations are dispensable in the sense that the practitioner is able to leave them for extended periods and enter politics without any loss of skill during his period of absence and return to the profession without much loss or disturbance.

The data with regard to occupation reveals that nearly 75 per cent of the women panchayati raj leader mentioned that either agriculture or animal husbandry as their occupation. Nearly 22 per cent of women panchayati raj leader mentioned that they have no occupation and they are simply housewives taking care of family and children.

Ownership of Land

Of all the economic resources land is the chief form of capital in rural areas; and generally the less land the peasant has, the poorer he is. Ownership of land, therefore, becomes a fair index of the economic status of persons connected with agricultural industry. The economic status, moreover, puts an individual in a particular 'social status' as well. Hence ownership of land becomes a major determinant of the socio-economic status of an individual in the agrarian society. The owner cultivator and the owner-cum-tenant cultivator are the only two classes who own some land. The rest are landless, and form the agricultural proletariat group.

In the context of rural India, land provided the most important means of production, and therefore became an

important source of power. There were land owning classes of people who effected the decision making process in rural areas through many of the institutional arrangements. Their rights extended beyond the right on the land, to many other social rights and responsibilities. This land not only provided productive asset base in the village, but also helped acquire social esteem. Thus the Indian system of social organization was based on a system of inequality of power, which was legitimized in the society. It has been observed by sociologists that land-owning classes of people also enjoyed a high social status. In turn, the social status also was an important source of power for this class of people.

Small farming required live-stock, implements and considerable human labour since mechanization is possible only on large farms. Live-stock such as bullocks, buffaloes and horses and to a small extent camels, are used as draught animals for ploughing, irrigating and sometimes for threshing. Bullock labour is also used for transport of manure to the fields, agricultural produce to the market, etc.

The data with regard to ownership of land revealed that nearly 35 per cent women panchayati raj leaders had less than 10 bighas of land. Nearly 16 per cent women panchayati raj leaders indicated that they had lands up to 25 bighas. Most of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes and other backward caste women panchayati raj leaders come under the above category. However, nearly 37 per cent women panchayati raj leaders did mention that they had lands between 25 bighas and 50 bighas and 12 per cent women panchayati raj leaders indicated that they had lands up to 10 bighas.

Income particulars

Income is generally taken as an index of social status and influence of a person particularly in India, where social status and influence go hand in hand with their income of a person. Though income is not an exclusive basis of influence, but certainly is an important basis. The prestige of an occupation is affected by the average income those who pursue it. Income is one of the chief rewards of an occupation.

The studies on leadership have indicated that there is a positive relationship between income and leadership. For instance, Oscar Lewis has stated that wealth is a basic criterion for leadership. Although leaders are found among all the three socio-economic classes, they clearly come from the upper levels of each and the correlation between wealth and leadership is highest as we move up the scale. Generally the rich or economic dominants are the most influential persons in any community of the world. The interest of the present study was to determine whether or not economic affluence is a determining factor in leadership and whether or not leaders are economically better off than their constituents.

Survey research data on income have tended to inspire less confidence. We present them for what they are worth, without being too skeptical. The data revealed that nearly 87 per cent of the women panchayati raj leaders' annual income is below Rs. 30000. Only 10 per cent women leaders mentioned that their annual income is between Rs. 30,001 to 50000 and the remaining two per cent women leaders mentioned that their annual income is between Rs. 50,001 to 1,00,000.

The data highlights the political party affiliation of the women panchayati raj leaders. Around 52 per cent of the

women panchayati raj leaders belonged to the congress (I) party and nearly 30 per cent women leaders belonged to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Most of the women panchayati raj leaders of BJP are from Kolayat Panchayat Samiti area. In kolayat panchayat samiti pradhan was BJP man and the member of Legislative Assembly form Kolayat constituency happens to be BJP member. Around 17 per cent women members mentioned that they are independents and belonged to no political party.

In a democracy political parties have a very significant role to play. The parties should take such measure, which would facilitate participation of women. All political must be urged to ensure that at least 30 per cent of the candidates fielded for election are women till such time as women can stake their claim to nomination as equals.

Women members of political groups should be vigilant about their discriminations in practices, women members should build up solidarity and oppose such practices. They should also press for implementing whatever has been promised to women. Women having political family background and better socio-economic status are likely to participate more in political activities than those who do not have these privileges.

Reasons for Joining Politics

A question was asked about the reasons for entering politics, the reasons given by the women panchayati raj leaders were computed as under five headings.

1. To stay in power
2. To help People in society
3. Pressure from family members
4. Pressure from party
5. No women candidate available

As the data indicates nearly 72 per cent women panchayati raj leaders mentioned that to help rural people or to save rural people as the reason for entering politics. Around 10 per cent women panchayati raj leaders mentioned that there was a strong pressure from family members to contest the election, since these seats are reserved for women candidates. Earlier male members used to contest the election. Another 8 per cent of the women leaders mentioned that since no women candidate is available, they have contested the elections.

All the parties are concerned with only the game of numbers as majority alone ensures their control over government machinery at any level. This consideration determines their sole criterion for the selection of candidates viz, the elective merit. This criterion has led to the elimination of many genuine activists and brought inactive women relatives of male politicians to the forefront. Wherever there was no prominent women activist, the vacuum was filled by the proxy woman.

- (a) The proxies display a lower level of political awareness.
- (b) The proxies owe their primary loyalty to their family. Their role of an elected representative being merely an extension of their role as a housewife.
- (c) Some proxies are forced to enter politics by their family members against their own wishes. They are further pressurized to resort corrupt practices.
- (d) Proxies enter in to political arena for protecting the constituency of their male relatives and are prepared to vacate the same, once, de-reserved. Their involvement in politics in not means of self-actualization and self-expression.

A question was asked to find out whether the women political leaders contested the panchayati raj elections earlier. The data reveals that an over whelming majority of women panchayati raj leaders have not contested the election earlier. In fact majority of the women leaders are first timers to the panchayati raj institutions. Contesting election is a more serious form of participation then voting or participating in campaigning activities. Contesting requires political skills, resources and right political connections. The higher the level at which one attempts to contest, the higher the level of skills and resources required. The recent trends in India, suggest that high education is not a necessary resources for contesting even state or parliamentary election. However, barring panchayat elections, women contestants are usually more educated than men contestants. However, the level at which a person contests an election is not simply a matter of choice. It is conditioned by the influence availability of funds and above all the will of party high command. Political parties are too reluctant to give tickets to women. One of the greatest hurdles in contesting elections is who have very limited independent resources to participate but, completely eliminates women in the poverty sector from entering the arena. This situation leads to prominence of upper castes, upper classes, and urban women in the political sphere. To counteract this iniquitous situation, serious steps must be taken to reduce election expenditure. Further, enormous amounts needed for election expenditure. Further, enormous amounts needed for election lead to corruption and various nefarious practices. If steps are taken to decentralize the political machinery, then unnecessary expenditure in reaching out a very large electorate could be avoided.

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