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Women Representation and Panchayati Raj: An Analytical study

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Abstract

Women's leadership and effective participation is increasingly on the development agenda of governments, bilateral and multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations, including women's rights groups. Evidence from programmes and research demonstrates the important role women play as key actors and decision-makers in the development process across a wide range of sectors. In the political arena in particular, there is growing momentum among governments to foster and ensure women's participation and leadership in governance structures. Establishing quotas for women's representation at different levels of governance has been a strategic tactic in achieving this goal in many countries. This article discusses the overview of women representation in panchayati raj with special focus on the suggestion for increasing the effective participation of women in panchayati raj

Keywords: Women, panchayats, participation, awareness, governance, knowledge.

1. Introduction

The participation of Indian women in the freedom movement led by Gandhi as well as enlightened leadership of India ensured that Indian women got equal political rights in the constitution of free India; however, in reality despite some successes, the majority of Indian women were left far behind men in enjoyment of these rights. Hence the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India provide the legal basis for direct democracy at the local-level, both in rural and urban areas ^[1, 5]. The amendments stress the need to bring people belonging to marginalized groups into the political process by reserving seats for women and for people belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) ^[2]. It is envisaged that by mandating not less than one-third of the seats for women in local government bodies, the governance process at the local government level will reflect the voices of women and the concerns and issues that confront them. This has resulted in 247,115 elected Panchayats (locally elected self government bodies) in the country, which contain more than 2.8 million elected representatives. Of these elected representatives, more than 1 million are women ^[3, 6]. However, this aggregate figure tells only part of the story. While representation is adequate (as per the norm of one-third of all seats) participation is less than adequate. While it is relatively easy to legislate representation, it is more difficult to create conditions suitable for participation. Experience indicates that representation does not automatically lead to participation.

2. Factors effecting the participation of women in Panchayati Raj

First, deeply entrenched stereotypical norms relegate women to the domestic space, with severely restricted engagement in public affairs, an area largely dominated by men. Second, caste and class restrictions and the patriarchal system and mindset pervades the political space provided to women. Women are still not recognized as political entities and their perspective is seldom seen as integral to the design and delivery of services. The third factor is the lack of exposure of women themselves to politics and the absence of any experience in exercising their political responsibilities. Low literacy levels, absence of education and limited or no exposure, all lead to a lack of confidence and many women are unable to comprehend the true spirit of decentralization and recognize the opportunities that it provides ^[4].

3. Suggestion for increasing the effective participation of women's in panchayati raj

3.1 Campaign Approach

The campaign approach should be adopted to bring women into political structures and support their participation in politics, by organizing campaigns and training programmes to prepare women to discharge multiple roles, enabling them to link local priorities to the planning process. A campaign-based approach influence peoples' perspectives on panchayats and local

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governance and to encourage them to participate in gram sabha meetings. In the pre-election period, campaigns were devised to motivate people to participate constructively in the elections, both as voters and/or candidates. Approach sought to promote an enabling environment for free and fair elections, encourage increased participation of women and people belonging to marginalized groups (as voters and candidates), generate awareness among voters about the importance of exercising their right to franchise and encourage them to vote for women candidates. Some elements of the campaign approach are:

3.1.1 Awareness generation and perspective building

These campaigns focused on the importance of people's participation in governance, the features of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act and the role of women in governance. Posters, pamphlets, handbills, inspirational songs, nukkad natak (street plays) and mashaal jaloos (torch light processions) should be organized.

3.1.2 Support in filing nominations and mock polling exercises

There should be a nomination camps to offer support to aspiring candidates, especially women. These camps must provide information regarding filing of nominations, assisted in filling nomination forms and encouraged women to contest from unreserved seats. This will result relatively few instances of invalid nominations being filed and an increase in the number of women who contested from unreserved seats. Mock polling exercises serve to generate awareness among voters and make them familiar with the polling process.

3.1.3 Mobilizing people to participate in gram sabha meetings

Mobilization campaigns are an effort to increase people's participation in gram sabha meetings. In mobilization campaigns, printed material, highlighting the importance of gram sabhas, the role, powers and functions of the members, is distributed to create awareness.

3.2 Building capacities of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) and other women leaders

The basic idea is that informed and well trained EWRs and leaders will be equipped to handle their roles and responsibilities independently and will be in a better position to participate effectively in panchayat affairs. Capacity-building approaches sought to enhance the understanding of women representatives and leaders about their role and responsibilities, the procedures and mechanisms associated with decentralized governance and the schematic interventions of the Government. Gender sensitization should be taken up in areas; activities include training programmes, perspective-building meetings, exposure visits, strengthening women's collectives and developing information dissemination mechanisms^[4].

3.3 Strengthening women's collectives and building networks

The interplay of several factors prevents women's voices from being heard, their needs being addressed and their active engagement in governance processes. The culture of continued subordination has rendered many women less than confident to exercise their public responsibilities. Coupled with the fear of being ridiculed and sidelined, this has been a

major constraint to the active participation of women in governance. The linkages between EWRs and women's groups or movements are limited. Recently there have been some efforts at building networks of women, though these have been limited.

3.4 Activating the gram sabhas

Empowering the community to enable people to participate proactively in the governance process was another aspect of the role to be undertaken across states. Unless regular gram sabhas are convened, with the active participation of the villagers, the objective of decentralized governance cannot be achieved. A special effort must be made to ensure that women and people belonging to the disadvantaged sections feel empowered and motivated, so that they can voice their concerns and ensure that these are placed on the agenda and discussed. In the absence of such motivation, very few people attend or participate effectively in gram sabha meetings.

3.5 Information dissemination mechanisms

Information dissemination strategies should be adopted included formation of information centres, information melas, radio programmes and the establishment of PRCs. This will enhance the knowledge base and result in the meaningful participation of peoples^[4].

4. The way forward

It is clear that the collaboration between women's groups, trained citizen leaders and the people themselves, as part of the strategy of design and implementation, has added value. Greater partnership between the government, stakeholders and NGOs can therefore make for effective interventions. Training has been a valuable and core element. Training must be seen as an ongoing process and should not be a onetime intervention. It is important to identify mechanisms that will support and strengthen the training process in the future. For example Panchayati Raj training institutions at the state level should involve experienced NGOs in their training programmes, especially for the training of EWRs. Most of the institutions focused their interventions on women and only a few institutions directed their efforts towards gender sensitization programmes. While such interventions are needed on a continued basis, gender sensitization training programmes need to be provided on an even larger scale to both women and men. In general, men were not targeted in the interventions and this is a serious gap that needs to be addressed in subsequent initiatives

5. Discussions

Capacity building exercises and the strengthening of women's networks will be critical elements in the transformation of many EWRs from passive, non-participating members to confident, active and responsible members of the community. As a consequence of properly implemented suggestions women who had so far been largely silent in public began to share and voice their concerns. Acknowledging this trend and the importance of women's participation, officials provided forum members with space in the office to conduct their meetings. The historic confluence of forces taking shape in India-the awakening of woman and the emerging commitment to local democracy have led to what is unquestionable the greatest social experiment in the world today, the transfer of decision making power to one million elected women local government representatives^[7]. These women are not only the beneficiaries of change-they are the key agents for change

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