

Empowerment of Women through Panchayat Raj Institutions: “With Special Reference to Ananthapuram District”

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Abstract

The world at large was also generating awareness about the problems of women in all spheres of life. The Charter of the United Nations was dedicated to “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion,” while the Preamble to the charter spoke of “the equal rights of men and women.”

Keywords: Empowerment, Panchayats, Equality, Social and economic status.

Introduction

The dawn of India’s political Independence in August 1947 and the establishment of a Republican form of State in 1950 brought to women the promise of adult franchise and equality of opportunity in all spheres which included social, economic and political activities. The assumption underlying these provisions was that every adult woman, irrespective of her social and economic status, would function as a citizen and as an individual in the task of nation- building. The constitutional rights were to serve as instruments for achieving equality of status and opportunities in all spheres. Equality in all spheres of life is indispensable for active political participation. This means not only exercising the right to vote but also participates in power sharing, profit sharing, co-decision-making and co-policy-making at all levels of government. The highest law of the land *i.e.*, the Constitution of India, pledges equality of status and opportunity, justice - social, economic and political and dignity of the individual, to men and women equally.

The convention on the political rights of women adopted by the General Assembly of U.N in 1952 stated that ‘women shall be entitled to hold public office and to exercise all public functions, established by national law, on equal terms with men, without any discrimination.’ This was the first instrument of International Law aimed at granting and protecting of women’s rights on a world-wide basis. The United Nations declared 1975 as the ‘International Women’s Year’ and 1980 as the ‘Year for Development of Women.’ The member nations declared 1975-1985 as the ‘Women’s Development Decade’. During this period, the nations of the world focused their attention and resources on the problems of women and aimed at integrating women with the social, economic and political activity.

Empowerment of Women

Empowerment is a term widely used in the context of women who are equal partners in development of the society and the nation. Women as a significant human resource can play their role effectively if they are provided equal opportunities and status on par with men. They need to be enabled to use improved technology in their daily activities for which relevant education and training are to be imparted to them in the same measures, as they are available to men. However, equal opportunities and status are only two dimensions of empowerment which is a way of defining, challenging and overcoming barriers in one’s life through which an individual increases one’s ability to shape up her life and environment. Women are the vital human infrastructure and their empowerment economic, educational, social and political would hasten the pace of social development. Investing in women’s “capabilities” and empowering them to achieve their “choices” and “opportunities” is the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development. Empowerment goes beyond socio-economic and political attribution and essentially refers to a process of becoming psychologically empowered. Poverty inflicts deep-rooted wounds on the psyche of individuals. If they cease to be oppressed, their first task would be to psychologically empower themselves. In this context, empowerment would mean increasing one’s capacity to define, analyse and act upon one’s own problem. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social, cultural, economic and political process that helps people gain

control over their own lives, communities and in their society by acting on issues that they define as important. Empowerment occurs within sociological, psychological, economic, cultural and political spheres and at various levels, such as individual, group, and community and challenges our assumptions about the status quo, asymmetrical power relationships and social dynamics.

Empowerment of women involves many things - economic opportunity, property rights, political representation, social equality, personal rights and so on. The Indian society is a patriarchal system in which women's position within the structure and duties towards the family precede their rights as individuals. Many people who argue for empowerment of women do so either with or without a full understanding of the conflicts between the historical and contemporary status of women in the patriarchy and the goals of empowerment. Certainly, we may track a great many changes that have occurred in the direction of change in the status of women in India but women have yet to achieve or realize many of the ideal stages of social, psychological, economic and political empowerment. Hence it is certainly more appropriate to define empowerment as a process rather than an end-point.

Empowerment by means of education, literacy or modest income-generating projects is clearly insufficient to ameliorate the prospects for a higher quality of life for women. The process of empowerment is taking place at so many levels that it is quite difficult to gauge the actual nature and extent of empowerment in improving status of women. Certainly the process is entangled in the struggles of civil society against the state, and under the weight of historical practice and ongoing debates over the appropriate role of ideologies.

The realities of women in rural India are difficult to comprehend. Women, most of the times, are even deprived of some of the fundamental human rights and this denial is justified often in the name of tradition. In rural areas, women are generally relegated mainly to household duties and cheap labour. They are not perceived as substantial income generating source for the family and are denied any role in decision making process either in the family or in the society. Without the power to work and earn a good income and with no power in decision making, their voices are silenced, as they are economically dependent, politically impotent and have no physical capacity to work and earn living requirements for them.

Historical Perspective

In Indian context, there was village Panchayats since times immemorial headed by a village headman. Its primary duty was to look after the administration of the village and cater to civic and other needs of the people. The women in the village Panchayat were conspicuous by their absence and they were treated as second rate citizens and were at the mercy of their menfolk. Balwantrai Mehta Committee Report (1957) for the first time recommended inclusion of two women members in Panchayat Raj institutions in order to carry on the specific programmes for women and children. These two women members were to be co-opted in case they did not get themselves elected. Following the recommendation of the Committee, women joined Panchayat Raj Institutions in many States, as adopted members rather than as elected ones. But, they were neither aware of their roles, their rights and duties, nor did they know much about the functioning of Panchayat Raj Institutions. They had virtually no practical experience to actively participate in the proceedings or PRIs or taking up issues or specific problems of women and children. Thus, their contribution in decision-making process has been inconsequential. The appointment of the Committee on Status of Women (1975) was an important landmark in the development of women in India. The Committee pointed out that woman constitutes a critical in-put in national development. The Committee recommended the establishment of statutory women's Panchayat Raj at the village level with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programmes for women and children as a transitional measure to break through the traditional attitude that inhibits most women from articulating their problems and participating actively in the existing local bodies. They could be directly elected by the women of the village and should have the right to send representatives to the Village Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and

Zilla Parishads.

This recommendation did not have any statutory status. Only in Andhra Pradesh such all women Panchayat Raj were formed. The reason for not implementing this provision was that instead of integrating women with the society, it segregated them from the society. In 1976, with the publication of the Report of the Committee there was a demand for the representation of women in the Panchayat Raj through reservations.

The Ashok Mehta Committee Report (1978) recommended that two women who get the highest number of votes in Zilla Parishad elections should be the members of Zilla Parishad. In case no women come forward for election, two women might be co-opted. Similar provision and procedures were recommended for the Mandal Panchayat Raj. In the light of these developments, certain states have made provision for reservation for women, of which Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka are worth mentioning.

After a long gap, the National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988, proposed the empowerment of women at the grass-root level of democratic institutions. The Plan recommended 30 per cent reservation of seats for women from Gram Panchayat Raj to Zilla Parishad. It was also recommended that 30 per cent posts of Chairpersons of all Panchayat Raj institutions should be reserved for women. In addition to this, certain percentage of Chief Executives of Panchayat Raj bodies at lower, middle and apex levels must also be reserved for women.

Women's movement gained further momentum under the leadership of Late Shri.Rajiv Gandhi. For the first time, the Government of India has set up a separate department for women. In pursuance of the proposals of the U.N. Committee on the Status of Women, "National Commission on Women" was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990.

Ultimately, participation of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been considered as the most effective instrument to remove their inequality, invisibility and powerlessness. All Women's Organisation in India, which met successively under the leadership of 'Mrs. Margaret Alva, Minister for Women's Development, gave their considered opinion that they should have 50 per cent representation in the Panchayat Raj Institutions. But, ultimately 33 per cent representation was agreed upon and this was granted by 73rd Amendment Act in 1992.

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 is a step towards this direction as it provides that not less than one- third of the elected members in the Panchayat Raj Institutions will be women. Besides, not less than one-third Chairpersons at the different tiers (Village, Block and Zilla), or Panchayat Raj will also be women. This is landmark legislation in the history of women empowerment in decision making in the political process in the country. The 73rd amendment can be considered as the watershed for women's empowerment.

The Constitution (73rd) Amendment Act, 1992, Article 243 D (3) reads:

"Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled up by direct election in every Panchayat Raj shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat Raj"

And Clause (4) of the Act has the following provisions:

"... not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayat Raj Institutions at each level shall be- reserved for women. Provided also that the number of offices reserved under this Clause shall be allotted by rotation to different Panchayat Raj Institutions at each level."

The provision of reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayat Raj bodies incorporated in the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution should be viewed in the broader context of the attempts made in our country, since independence, to improve the social and economic status of women, after the declaration of the Women's Decade by the UN in 1975. The Constitutional Amendment will have far-reaching consequences in Indian political and social life. This is indeed a welcome, though delayed, gesture.

In 1992, an international Seminar at Seoul was held on the participation of women in politics, an excerpt of declaration is quoted here: 'Convinced that in any fair, representative and efficient society, women should be active participants at the policy-making level in all forums that contribute to the political process and that they should be active executors of policy one made. It went on further to recommend legislation to "...ensure minimum levels of female representation in legislatures through systems such as reserved seats...." At an Asia Regional Seminar on 'Decentralised Governance' at the Institute of Social and Economic Change, Bangalore, held in March 1993, experts from Bangladesh, China, India, Sri Lanka, Philippines and Nepal discussed decentralised governance in their respective countries. It was clear from the proceedings that with the exception of India, none of these countries were contemplating reservation for women in the local bodies in the near future.

Women and Political Empowerment

The issue of women's political empowerment had gained momentum in the global debate for women's rights at the time of the Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995. The issue continued to hold centre-stage of all discussions on gender justice and equality. Women's equal access to, and full participation in decision making was emphasized in the Platform for Action, as one of the critical areas of concern. It unequivocally declared "Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account". It also affirmed that women should have at least a thirty percent share of decision making positions".

Politics has been the principal pillar of empowerment. The more there is the participation of women in politics, the more they can change the modalities and outcomes of politics. Several studies on post-73rd Amendment suggest that after the introduction of the 73rd Amendment Act, rural women, although, are participating in large numbers in rural grass-root level institutions, they still remain largely outside the realm of power and decision making. The gender difference in rural participatory politics is still very high. Many interrelated factors affect women's ability to participate in politics. The social hierarchies and inequalities that exist in Indian society deter the woman to play an active role in the societal functions including participation in political institutions.

The political empowerment and assumption of leadership role resulting from the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1993), therefore, has had impact in two socio-political areas. There is, first of all, a visible improvement in the administration and delivery of services at GP (Gram Panchayat Raj) level mainly, or of greater focus on the felt needs of the people, transparency, greater reliance on horizontal linkages and greater participation of people particularly women members of the village community. Secondly, the amendment has made possible the creation of political space, which has enabled women, to gain social status, confidence and to shake off age-old stronghold of repressive tradition.

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