



WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PANCHAYATI RAJ: A CASE STUDY OF DISTT. CHAMBA (H.P.)

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Abstract: 'Democratic decentralization', 'power to the people', 'grassroots democracy', 'good governance' and more. These were the hopes for impacts of Panchayati Raj, which was included in Indian Constitution after independence but these institutions remained mere decorations and were not effectively empowered. Various committees, set up by Government of India not only suggested measures for strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions but also recommended the strong participation of women as essential for this purpose. The demand of women representation and participation was met through 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India which reserved 33% seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, this quantitative leap of increased women's participation was not real because many of these women act as proxy to their men folk. Yet there are some success stories to cherish. This research paper tries to find out the impact of PRIs in the empowerment of women in the rural areas.

Key words: Women empowerment, panchayati raj.

People's participation is the backbone of democracy. In a modern democratic system, the decision making process virtually begins and ends with the elected representatives. No doubt, women were endowed with equal rights by the Constitution of India and had the right to vote and contest elections on the same basis as men. Yet they have remained under represented in decision-making. Recognition of this led to an increased awareness of the necessity of some sort of affirmative action which could enable women's entry into decision-making. This affirmative action came in the form of 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India. Though these Amendments, there was not only effective devolution of power but also a provision reserving 33% of seats in the village Panchayat, Block Samities and Zila Parishad as well as Municipal Corporations.

The issue of women's political equality first emerged during the early years of the twentieth century, at a time when women took active part in the national movement. The issue of women's political representation implying at the time, suffrage rights for women was raised as early as 1917. A limited franchise was granted by 1919, which was

extended in 1935. Women were equally, actively involved in conventional politics and continued to be so in the years following independence.

The active participation of women in the national movement, in less conventional politics such as environmental agitation as well as peasants movements and the need to incorporate women's issues and concerns in development led to the recognition of the need to make women's active participation in grassroots democracy. Their role in making grassroots democracy a success has been emphasized by all national level committees appointed to review the working of Panchayati Raj Institutions.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) not only recommended assistance to women to increase their incomes and improve the condition of their children but also co-operation of women members to Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Santhanam Committee (1963) recommended two women members in a Village Panchayat, four in the Samiti and eight in the Zila Parishad and recommended that "the association of women at every level of Panchayati Raj is necessary for its growth".

In 1974, a Committee on the status of women in India published its report under the heading, "Towards Equality" in December which reviewed women's political participation. It concluded that women had a negligible impact on the political process because of inequality of status and political power. To make the political rights of women more functional and to give them more opportunities, it recommended a set of quota in political parties, allotting a block of seats in Municipal Councils and establishment of women's Panchayats.

Asoka Mehta Committee (1978) recommended reservation of two seats for women and their participation in the elections. The Committee recommended that the two women who would get the highest number of votes in the Zila Parishad elections would be automatically co-opted to Zila Parishad even if they failed to get elected. The Committee recommended a similar provision for Mandal Panchayat.

However, as women came in through co-option or nomination rather than having taken active part in local affairs, their active participation remained nil. Hence, they were silent spectators and not real actors. This was a major drawback of this provision. Not merely it is undemocratic but also it is alleged that it smacked of protectionism. In practice, the system of co-option and nomination had meant sheer patronage of the dominant political or social groups and the women who got nominated neither had practical information on Panchayats nor any experience or exposure to public life.

Nevertheless, the felt need of bringing more women as well as the growing emphasis at the international level on feminization of politics and having critical mass of women in decision making led to an emphasis on affirmative action for women's political empowerment. In this context, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was passed, which provided reservation of 33% of the seats for women as Panches and Sarpanches. This silent revolution brought a million, previously excluded, sidelined and marginalized women into the decision making

process. This was followed by all the states enacting/amending their Panchayati Raj Acts to bring them in consonance with this Amendment. A new Amendment to the Article 243D has been made by the Parliament to enhance quota for women from 33% to 50% at every level of PRI's to reach towards the goal of gender equality.

Universe of study:

District Chamba, which is the universe of our study, is located in the state of Himachal Pradesh between 75° 45' and 77° 33'. The state came into existence in 1948. Chamba District was one of the four administrative districts constituted in 1948. The other three were Sirmour, Mandi and Mahasu. Lying mostly astride the main Himalayas and touching on the fringes at one corner of a bit of the district touches the boundaries with Jammu and Kashmir on the North- West and West, Ladakh area of J&K, Lahaul and Bara Banghal on the North- East and East, Kangra in the South- East and Gurdaspur district of Punjab in the South. The territory is wholly mountainous with altitudes varying from about 2000 feet to about 21000 feet above the mean sea level. The main natural divisions are the Ravi valley, which means the Chamba valley proper including Bharmour, the Churah area and the part of Bhattiyat Tehsil, Chenab valley which comprises Pangi, inclusive of Chamba, Lahaul and the Beas region which takes in the Bhattiyat and Sihunta Tehsil. There are five administrative divisions in the District Chamba namely Chamba proper, Churah, Bhattiyat, Bharmour and pangi.

Objective of the study:

To study the impact of reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions; have they been effectively empowered; and are they helping to bring about transformative politics and good governance?

Methodology:

This study has been confined to District Chamba in the state of Himachal Pradesh. There are five Development Blocks in District Chamba. A sample of 150 women members of Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishad were selected

through random sampling. 30 women from each Development Block were randomly selected as sample for this study.

For the present study the data was collected with the help of questionnaire and interview method. The interview schedule and research questions were prepared in the light of the objective of the study and the research questions formulated for the study were translated in Hindi. Some of the questions were pre-coded while others were open-ended. Apart from the interview schedule, informal discussion with elected representatives and officials also formed a part of survey. Statistical techniques were used to analyze the primary data. Various published and unpublished sources constitute the secondary data and include various reports viz., census. Primary sources also include reports, annual reports of Panchayati Raj Institution and journals on related topics.

Findings:

If we talk about the socio-economic profile of the respondents, it was observed that majority of them (88.7%) were involved in the occupation of agriculture. Nearly 1/4th of the respondents were illiterate and a very few (2.7%) went to college for graduation. About 90% of the respondents were married and majority of them (64.7%) were living in joint family.

The women leaders were well aware about the structure and functions of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Their general awareness about reservation and its possible impact on women was very good. On a scale of low, medium and high level of political and administrative awareness, a majority of the women grassroots leaders (64.7%) fell into the category of medium level of awareness, while 22% came into low level of awareness. Merely 13.3% could be said to be highly aware.

Whenever a woman enters into local self administration, she might be inspired or motivated by someone. There is also a possibility that her entry in this field could be due to her own desire or her capability or aptitude. Research shows that only 12.7% of the respondents were self-motivated but the rest (87.3%) were encouraged by others, who could be husband, father, village women or other family members. The majority of the respondents were motivated by the spirit of social service (57.3%), while another (22%)

were motivated by women's welfare and development and 20.7% were motivated by development of lower castes.

Research found that majority of respondents (78%) attend the Panchayat meetings regularly. Attendance at meetings is one thing, a related issue is whether they are mute spectators or do they raise issues in the meetings and if yes, what type of issues? Research shows that 78.6% women respondents answered positively. They assisted that they raised issues in Panchayat meetings which were related to social welfare and development, village welfare, drinking water, education and, irrigation, road, women welfare, economic development etc. However, 21.4% of women respondents stated that they hesitate to speak in meetings in front of males as they have been socialized in such a manner.

Performance flows from perception. The question arises how these women leadership perceive themselves and their role in village administration. First, the respondents were asked about the perception about the reasons which hinder the successful performance of women as Panchayat leaders. Most of the respondents (44.6%) stated that male domination is the main reason which hinders the successful performance of females, because males do not want to share political power with the women. 37.4% women respondents opined that because of domestic problems women failed to perform successfully, while 16% respondents focused upon lack of awareness and illiteracy among women and their economic dependency on male members as the main reasons for unsuccessful performance of women leaders. Only 2% women respondents did not answer this question.

The opinion of women leaders was also sought on whether 50% reservation had resulted in a social transformation in the village. Maximum women members (66.7%) responded positively. They revealed that 50% reservation had resulted in a social transformation for women. The main social change in their village is that women, who were treated as oppressed class, came out from their houses to participate in administration. Now they started working for welfare and development of community. They are becoming more aware and independent. Villagers approach them for different kinds of help regarding

family disputes, land and property disputes, education, health etc. They also can express their views in front of public without any hesitation. 33.7% women however failed to give any kind of opinion about social transformation.

One significant issue on which their opinion was sought is corruption in local administration. Varied responses came in which showed that they were aware of this problem in the Indian society and they offered their solutions. Most of the respondents (53.1%) said that education, awareness and honesty among the people can resolve this problem. A significant number (36%) revealed that the strength of people, their unity and honesty and the rules made by the Government could help in solving this problem. 10% women suggested that people should vote for right and honest candidates which will lead to the erosion of this problem automatically. They emphasized that the leaders should be honest, only then this evil could be eradicated. However, some of the respondents declared that there is no corruption in their village. People and leaders are honest and opined that corruption actually exists at higher levels, not at village level.

Conclusion:

In sum, it may be said that the women members in District Chamba were quite aware about the functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and their role in it. A majority of them were quite active and participated quite effectively. They attend meetings, raise issues and work for village development. However, in minority, nevertheless significant

proposition revealed various impediments which hampered their effective participation including lack of education, awareness and lack of finance and funds as well as domestic and health problems. Obviously, the de jure empowerment guaranteed through 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and 50% reservation is yet to confer a de facto status to them. A critical mass of women has been attained. Yet real and effective participation requires concerted efforts through Governmental and non- Governmental organizations to provide sensitization, orientation and hearing in order to realize the vast potential of these women.

Suggestions:

- First and foremost is training. Training programmes should ensure continuity and touch upon several aspects, not only the basics of Panchayati Raj but also the knowledge about Government schemes.
- There is need for devolution of finances and freedom to take financial decisions in order to implement the development plans.
- The role of gram Sabha should be strengthened. In this way, the women who are not able to contest elections or hold the Panchayat membership would be able to participate in the Panchayat's initiatives for different issues related to village.
- Active support structures like women self- help groups; women development committees should be strengthened.

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