

A PERSPECTIVE STUDY ON PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

(With reference: Women Empowerment)

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of material, intellectual and human resources. Empowerment is the redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance. Political empowerment of women is part of the overall empowerment process. Political participation is a major path to women's empowerment and participation in decision-making power will lead to women's empowerment in true sense of the term. In other words, increased decision-making power gives greater ability to influence matters that affect our lives in the community and the society at large. present study analyzed the Badangi mandal Panchayat in Vijayanagarm District in Andhra Pradesh.

Keywords: Challenges, Influence, Power, Redistribution,

INTRODUCTION

Article 15 of the Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to both men and women. Though women were given equal status on par with men as citizens, keeping in view the special disabilities, Article 15(3) of the Indian Constitution also empowers the states to make any special provision for women and children even in violation of the fundamental obligations of non-discrimination among citizens, inter-alia of sex. Although independent India promised equality of opportunities to women in all spheres, women, especially in the political sphere are laying behind. It is well known that women around the world have not gained equal status with men especially in the political sphere because of male domination. The low political status of women throughout the world had led to the emphasis on 'political empowerment of women'. That political empowerment would be useful to achieve women's empowerment in general has been accepted widely. Absence of political empowerment to women is also one of the main factors for the various problems that women are facing today. Problems in a society are generally related to political decisions of the administration where political power is concentrated. Therefore political power is most important power in the process of political empowerment of women to overcome the low status of women in political decision-making. From 1990 there has been increasing emphasis on political empowerment of women. It is worth to mention the declaration of Beijing Conference, which was held at China in 1995. "We are convinced that Women's Empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace.

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patriarchal ideology and male dominance. Political empowerment of women is part of the overall empowerment process. Political participation is a major path to women's empowerment and participation in decision-making power will lead to women's empowerment in true sense of the term. In other words, increased decision-making power gives greater ability to influence matters that affect our lives in the community and the society at large. "Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace. The explicit recognition and reaffirmation of the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility is basic to their empowerment.....women's opportunities to exercise power are in many contexts greater at the local than at the national level. In India and France, policies to increase women's participation in local elections led to significant increase in women's presence in local office. Since 1993, one-third of seats in local councils in India are reserved for women. Studies of Women's participation in village councils report on the empowering effects for the women themselves as well as the positive impact of women's presence on local politics. India is ranked 93rd among the member states of UNO in empowering women. One of the objectives of the Ninth Five Year Plan is the empowerment of Women and socially disadvantaged groups. Political empowerment of women through Panchayat Raj institutions is an healthy attempt which would result in the realisation of Gandhiji's dream of Gram Swaraj. The 73rd and 74th Amendments of Indian Constitution aimed at the greater participation of women and members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, in running the affairs of Panchayat Raj Institutions and thus furthering the ideals of Women's empowerment and social justice. Participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions by directly and indirectly, attending the meetings regularly, taking active part in decision-making, contesting in the elections are some of the ways to empower women politically. The 73rd and 74th Amendments have thrown open political opportunities in the Panchayats. There are only few studies which examined the role of disadvantaged sections in decision making and their effectiveness in delivering public goods. Under the present scenario of increasing focus on political empowerment of women, studies on the role of women at the gross root level administration is an area to be explored largely.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

There is a special need to concentrate on micro level studies about rural women of backward area, for political empowerment is to be begin with bottom sections of the society. Hence the aim of the present study is to assess the process of political empowerment of women in one of the backward mandals of Andhra Pradesh. Badangi Mandal of Vizianagaram district is the area identified by the researcher for field study as the area represents more number of women in the three tire system of Panchayat Raj Institutions. Also, the researcher being born and brought up in the Mallampeta Village of Badangi Mandal felt that it would be helpful to have a better understanding of the issues of his own area for the field investigation. The objectives of the study covers the following aspects:

1. To analyze the nature and process of empowerment and the involvement of women as individuals and groups.

2. To study the socio-economic and political background of women that influence their participation in the process of empowerment.
3. to examine the factors that contribute their participation and also to study if there are any obstacles that are coming in their way of participation in the process of empowerment.
4. To suggest some steps to be taken to strengthen women's representation at the gross root level to influence the decision making process through political empowerment.

METHODS AND MATERIALS:

The present study is based on historical, analytical, empirical and sample survey methods. The total respondents chosen for the present study are 76. The data has been collected from the available literature on Panchayat Raj institution, women's political participation, in the form of books and professional journals. Some of the data has also been collected from the relevant acts of the State Legislature and records of the institutions of the area under study. As the study is an empirical study,

1. Personal information regarding caste, age, education, marital status.
2. Awareness of political empowerment of women, process of empowerment, participation at the local administrative institutions, awareness of Panchayat Raj Institutions.
3. Impact of family, society and officials on the process of empowerment. Family members encouragement for their participation in politics.

In addition to the information collected through structured questionnaire, primary data has been collected through face to face interviews with the respondents of the area under study, each interview stretching from one hour to one and half hours. During the face to face interview the respondents spoke beyond the questionnaire and provided useful insights into the process of political empowerment of women and the same is presented in the foregoing pages of the thesis. In order to get first hand information to verify certain facts with regard to political empowerment of women and their participation in the Panchayat Raj Institutions, the researcher also had informal talks with the fathers/brothers/husbands of the respondents and also interviewed the concerned officials of the Panchayat Raj institutions of the area under study. Informal interviews were also conducted with some of the male and female senior citizens of Badangi Mandal to know their opinions about the Political Empowerment of Women through Panchayat Raj Institutions and the performance of women in these Institutions. As the present study is a micro level one, a sample is taken. The completion of the collection of data is followed by the process of statistical techniques and analysis.

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Marilee Karl in his book on 'Empowerment and Women' (1995) highlighted the process of empowerment. According to him, empowerment is a process and is not therefore something that can be given to people. The process of empowerment is both individual and collective. Since it is through involvement in groups that people must often begin to develop their awareness and the ability to take action and bring about change. Women's empowerment can be viewed as a continuation of several interrelated and mutually reinforcing components:

1. Awareness building about women's situation, discrimination, rights and opportunities as a set towards gender equality collective awareness building provides a sense of group identity and the power of working as a group.

2. Participation and greater control and decision making power in the home, community and society

3. Action to bring greater equality between men and women. In short empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision making power and control and to gain formative action

Sakuntala Narasimhan in her book on 'Empowering Women' (1999) discussed women's networks alternative strategies in the process of empowerment. Sangeeta Purushothaman examines the gender barriers in the process of empowerment, Manikyamba's study on 'Women in Panchayat Raj Structures (1996) throws light on the working of women in the decision making process, inbuilt abilities of women and their concern to the development of the society. It also brings out the successful functioning of the women in the grass root level administration. D'Lima Hazel focuses on the socio-economic background of the leaders of the local self Government in Maharashtra. It also brings out the various social aspects in the process of political empowerment of women. Studies on women's entry into Panchayat Raj institutions in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh concentrated on the performance of women and the obstacles they face. A study conducted in Madhya Pradesh brings out the reflections of officials and other secretarial staff with regard to the performance of women leadership in Panchayat Raj Institutions. A study conducted by Snehalata Pandabring out the positive pattern of emerging women's leadership in traditional setting with a male dominance in the family. V.B.Athereya and K.Rajeswari found out the satisfactory performance of women representatives in the local self government. K Vijayakumar and Vanaja Rani in their study opined that economic freedom, resource and political representation are essential for empowerment. Through the above overview of literature it is revealed that the existing literature on empowerment of women especially in the context of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment is limited. Some of the above mentioned studies on the empowerment of women are macro level studies and generally concentrate on the outer layer of the problem as the area of the study is supposed to be larger. Studies of micro level nature help us to look into the problem in depth and to take healthy precautions in solving the problems and reaching the target. Under the present policy of 'empowering women' though grass root administration, micro level studies on empowerment of women are highly useful to improve the process of empowerment. As a result of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment the women and the backward class were given the opportunity to participate in the governance through reservations. There are about 73,513 women members at GP level, 4,776 at MP level and 361 at ZP level; 38,764 SC members at GP level, 789 MPTC and 126 ZPTCs, 15304 ST members at GP level, 803 MPTCs and 66 ZPTCs. What is more important is the performance level of these sections in the service of the poor and needy. With this background the present study on the 'political empowerment of Women.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

As a first step in the process of political empowerment, women were able to exercise their duties as heads of local political bodies. Some of the successful women representatives brought tremendous changes in their villages. In other words, the village Panchayats under the leadership of women were reconstructed through various developmental activities. Good roads were laid, bores were dug, schools have been started and temples have been renovated.

The study also shows that women of the Badangi mandal in their process of political empowerment are undergoing a transformation between tradition and modernity. Though they come forward to change their attitudes towards various customary practices that obstruct their development, they are not completely discarding some of their age old customs and traditions. As far as religion is concerned they did not discard their faith in religion.

As a result of the political orientation, through political parties, non-governmental organizations and media, the process of political empowerment among the women of Badangi mandal has been broadening the scope of women leadership at the gross root level. Findings of this study also reveal that some of the women Sarpanches and ward members were able to bring a remarkable change in the functioning of the village Panchayats. They are able to utilize their level best the opportunity come to them as a result of the constitutional amendments of 73rd and 74th. The male group of these villages have been compelled to change their attitudes towards the hidden abilities of the women and willing to accept the changes in the village set up and coming forward to cooperate with the women Sarpanches

One of the findings of the study is that village secretaries though a few try to dominate the women Sarpanch which again an obstacle to women representatives in exercising their assigned duties.

Women of the area showed greater enthusiasm towards the various schemes that were introduced for the welfare of women. By joining in various developmental programmes as members they were able to understand the collective work of the women force and gained confidence about their abilities.

SUGGESTIONS:

The following suggestions can be made to ensure adequate and effective participation of women in the Panchayat Raj system in the process of political empowerment of women.

- a) As suggested by Mohini Giri, former Chairperson of the National Commission for Women, Government of India, a Federation of Women Panchayats should spread throughout the length and breadth of the country and this federation will be a platform to advocate, lobby and bring about changes for gross root empowerment,. A dedicated band of federation of working Panchayat women who are newly entering local political structures to ensure that they have the necessary training and resources to fully participate in local affairs. It is hoped that this federation would be prepared to work in partnership with India's women leaders as they create their vision and plans for a new future for their communities and for their country.
- b) Systematic efforts should be made by Government and non-governmental organizations to address the constraints faced by the elected women representative one of the most important draw back of the rural women is illiteracy and a higher proportion of women elected representatives in Panchayat Raj Institutions are illiterate. Official machinery must make

serve attempts to overcome the constraints of illiteracy. In the words of AS Rajes Tandon, President of Participatory Research in Asia “Women ‘s Participation and Leadership in PRIS need to be taken up seriously by central and State Governments if the vision of local self governance is to be realized in India. Positive support from state governments can contribute significantly towards engendering governance-Women’s Panchayati Raj.

c) To empower women politically training centres are to be established where women are taught gender issues confidence building, managing Panchayat institutions. Other women organizations need to cooperate with these training centers so that there can be exchange of information with regard to various issues related to women. The women who have already served a term can extend .

d) Suggestions as mentors.Under the present day circumstances there is a great need of women’s representation in the local political bodies to achieve political empowerment. They should not remain as dummies. They must try to know what are their duties as representatives of the people. They must be in a position to take quick and correct decisions for the overall development of the villages.

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