Empowerment of Women in India through Panchayati Raj System

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In India, a silent revolution has taken place in rural areas where people are becoming conscious of their rights. One-and-a-half decades after the introduction of the panchayati raj system at the grassroots level, it is now appropriate to take stock of the situation of women participation and empowerment in India. Generally, there have been contrasting responses to this phenomenon. One, an overwhelming reaction to the entry of women in panchayats, which many term as superficial, as most women are token heads, harassed in public sphere and hijacked by their male relatives; and the other, a positive response to their involvement and participation.

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INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in the village administration has brought about a tactical shift in the functioning of grassroots democracy. The changing situation in power structures has created opportunities for the Indian woman to take active part in panchayati raj. Now, women are not restricted to home and hearth, but are entering into various fields and proving their capabilities. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 that grants 33% reservation for women in the panchayati raj have encouraged women to participate in their village development and plan for the future of their villages. More significantly, priorities at the village development level have changed health, child education, sanitation, socio-economic development for the better. Discussion in an open atmosphere and participation of women in the process of decision-making creates a sense and meaning to rural women. Yet, her position in the family is quite tense — combating oppressive forces, working as second fiddle in the public sphere and limited by the stereotypical attitude of a society dominated by males.

The origin of the panchayati raj system in India is not a sudden phenomenon but rather evolutionary in nature. Village panchayats, as the institution of self governance, have their roots in ancient India. In modern India, the institute of panchayati raj remained central to the thinking, understanding and action of Mahatma Gandhi who harnessed the age-old democratic grassroots tradition of India for liberating the country from British rule, regenerating her from
centuries of political subjugation, social and economic retardation, and unchaining her potential. “India lives in villages” was Gandhiji’s life mantra — village administration remained at the heart of his vision for decentralising power, uplifting more than half a million villages in which India lived, acquisition of capacity by common citizens for controlling the authority of the government and above all, for quickening the process of development so that the ordinary people were the country’s fountain-head and principal beneficiaries (Sahu, 2005:47). Panchayats in this sense constituted for him the basic building block of democracy and the means for the reconstruction of India from below. Focusing on panchayati raj, Mahatma Gandhi wrote on 18 May, 1947: “Democracy requires everyone, man or woman to realise his or her responsibility. This is what is meant by panchayati raj” (Sahu, 2005: 49). Jawaharlal Nehru, while signifying the role of traditional village panchayats narrates: “During the time of Rig Veda (1200B.C.), evidence suggests that self-government village bodies called ‘sabha’ existed. With the passage of time, these bodies became a panchayat (council of five persons). Panchayats were functional institutions with grassroots level governance in almost every village. The village panchayat or elected council had large powers, both executive and judicial” (Singh, 2006:17).

But the British rule in India destroyed the basic fabric of rural administration. Besides, the quest for panchayati raj system was getting a low response and the question of even getting the request from the local area for setting up village panchayats was limited to resident males. This reflects the prevalent ideology, which did not address the questions of female voters or female elected representatives (Buch, 2001:8). During the British period, the Franchise Committee set up by the British government which left the question of women’s franchise in India to provincial legislatures and linked it with the issue of local culture and sensitivity on the subject. In the first report on the bill for the Government of India Act, 1919, the Joint Selected Committee of the British Parliament endorsed the recommendation of the Franchise Committee on the subject of women’s franchise and said the “question whether women should or should not be admitted to the franchise on the same terms as men should be left to the newly elected legislative council of each province to settle by resolutions.” Hence, the Government of India Act, 1919, provided that if the legislative council in any province passed a resolution in favour of women’s franchise, they should be put in the electoral register of that province. The statutory rules made under the Act of 1919 did not make women eligible for appointment as members of the legislative councils (Buch, 2001:9). The law was modified later and powers given to the council to pass resolutions to allow qualified women to become members by election or nomination.

The question of women’s participation in panchayats in Independent India had merited the attention of the Committee on the Status of
Women in India (1974). The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) prioritised women representation in the panchayats. Internationally, the Mexico Plan (1975) and the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985) influenced India to come out with a plan with a broad-based strategy to deal with women issues and women empowerment at the village level. The Nairobi Strategies called on participating countries to take steps for ensuring women’s participation in politics through reservation of 35% seats in all elections (Datta, 2001:30).

**WOMEN’S ISSUES IN PANCHAYATI RAJ POST-INDEPENDENCE**

Gandhiji’s dream of Swaraj in terms of well-being of people, grassroots democracy and empowerment of rural people in India was materialised with the mandatory introduction of panchayati raj system in states under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The inspiration for the introduction of 33% reservation for women in panchayati raj was the brain-child of Rajiv Gandhi. While delivering his inaugural address to the 13th All India Panchayati Parishad on September 22, 1986, Rajiv Gandhi said: “We cannot do from above what can be done with speed and vigour at the grassroots level. Thus, if we want to see India strong and united, the work of the panchayat is of paramount importance. Without it, the country cannot make progress” (Sahu, 2005:50).

After a prolonged deliberation, as a first step, the government made the provision in the Panchayat and Nagarpalika Bill of 1992 to reserve 33% of candidature and constituencies in local bodies — panchayats, municipalities and corporations — for women (Mathai, 2006:83). The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution and inclusion of provisions under Article 243 are regarded as a watershed in the history of state initiative on political empowerment of rural women. It had indicated a paradigm shift in the approach towards the women’s cause. Earlier, women were generally viewed as an object of development only. However, this amendment made women the subject of development and an indispensable part of the decision-making process. The amendment also provided for the reservation of one-third of the total number of offices for chairpersons in the panchayat at all levels for women including women from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Due to reservation of seats, the formal participation of women in politics has gone up considerably (Datta, 2001:30).

Concepts like ‘Bharat Nirman’, ‘India Shining’, ‘Feel Good’, ‘Rainbow’, ‘Socio-economic Development’, ‘Mainstream Development’, ‘Nation Building Process’, ‘Grassroots Administration’, and ‘Good Governance’, could not have been possible without the participation and empowerment of women from below. According to economist Amartya Sen: “Women are less likely to secure a favourable outcome for themselves in household decision-making processes. They feel that
their long-term security lies in subordinating their well-being to that of the male authority figures” (Singh and Kumari, 2007:3-4).

Empowerment of women in general and rural women in particular involves many factors: economic opportunity, property rights, political representation, social equality, personal rights, etc. To empower women is to rectify the historical wrong-doings against them. The central goal of empowerment is to challenge patriarchal ideology, transfer the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetrate gender discrimination and social inequality, enable poor women to gain access to and control over both material and informational resources (Borain, 2003:521). According to the Jakarta Declaration: “Empowerment of women is not only an equity consideration, it is also a necessary pre-condition for sustainable social and economic development, involvement of women in the political arena and in the decision-making process” (Panda, 2007:8).

Empowerment of women in Indian society involves the building up of a society wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure (Shiva Kumar Lal). One of the major strides for the empowerment of women in India is to empower them politically and more specifically at the grassroots village level. And for this purpose, the panchayati raj system provides an appropriate forum for rural women. Such an approach provides the women with a constitutional platform to stand up to their men, raise their voices on women oppression, subjugation and related issues and thus in effect, provide them with an identity in an orthodox socio-political set-up; this, in addition, to providing a much-needed forum to seek redressal of problems directly affecting them, which is the true essence of empowerment.

**WOMEN EMPOWERMENT BY PANCHAYATI RAJ SINCE 1992**

Women’s entry into panchayats, both as members as well as heads after the implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) has pushed them into the process of decision-making and policy implementation considerably. It has been observed that the integration of women into the political process has an important bearing on the working of the democratic institution (Panda, 2007:10). By 1994, 3,30,000 women had entered politics as a result of panchayats and many more have been elected in the last two years; the percentage of women at various levels of political activity has shifted dramatically, that is, from 4–5% to 25–40% after 1992 (Devaki Jain). By 1999, as many as 7,68,582 women had been elected to gram panchayats, and 38,582 women to panchayat samitis (Fadia, 2006:949).

It is remarkable to note that on August 27, 2003, the then President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam administered the oath of office to 400 women sarpanches from Chattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh,
Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal. These women took a pledge to follow the Seven-Point Programme prepared by President Kalam for improving life in rural area:

- Children will be valued as our great asset.
- Development of society, education and rights of boys and girls must be given equal importance.
- We will not waste our hard earned money on gambling and alcohol.
- We will keep our family small for better health and prosperity.
- We will make our children understand the importance of education, because education imparts knowledge and knowledge makes children successful.
- We will unite to protect the forests and check pollution.
- Every person will plant at least five trees and saplings.

With these, the President asserted: “The strength and wealth of India lives in villages, and when women become leaders, the mission never fails” (Gill, 2006:83-84).

In Maharashtra, women panchayat members have been found to be taking up issues to ensure potable drinking water and toilet facilities, playgrounds and schools for children on priority. In some villages in Maharashtra, with all-women panchayats, they established the practice of procuring water taps and pipes and getting them repaired within 24 hours. In one village where no teacher had been appointed to the school, 22 women marched to the block development office and they demanded a teacher, with success.

There are many achievements in Orissa where women have entered into the village panchayats. For example, a Gond tribal woman from Orissa, Ramrati Bai on assuming charge of a village panchayat as the sarpanch fought hard to ensure water supply, construction of roads, creating employment opportunities and arranging pension facilities, in addition to fighting against the social evils of dowry, alcoholism and child marriage. She raised these social issues in the Gram Sabha despite stiff resistance from the village. In order to maintain transparency, she produced all records and account books before the panchayat. With her zeal and hard work, she was able to break the male supremacy and instill confidence among villagers about the capability of women as political decision-makers and caretakers at the community level. In the next election, she contested against six male candidates and won (Gill, 2006:86).

In many states, it is found that if women who had been elected to panchayat bodies for the first time mainly due to the reserved constituencies, and were being represented by their husbands in meetings, functions etc., they have displayed a stronger will power when faced with the election for the second time. The case study of Jagatsinghpur district of Orissa revealed a woman sarpanch who made
logical arguments before the collector demanding more relief for the panchayat after the Super Cyclone hit the area in 1999 (Satpathy, 2002).

In contrast to male fury, a study of four villages by PRIA, a research institute in Delhi, found that in three villages of Haryana, husbands were supportive of their sarpanch wives. The sarpanch of Kot village in Haryana was assertive and handled village problems effectively. She developed confidence in interacting with higher officials and NGOs. Her husband supported her in implementing the decisions of the panchayat and governmental programmes at the village level (Panwar, 2001:35). A study by M.A. Samad (2007) in four districts (Kollam, Trichur, Malapuram and Kozhikode) of Kerala reveals that the family members were willing to rise to the occasion and free women from household burdens facilitating them to take up new assignments, a deviation from the traditional outlook of society (Samad, 2007:37).

There is caste assertion and good performance of dalits in India in the local administration and management. In Rajasthan, Durga Devi, a Mehtar by caste and sweeper by profession, became the sarpanch of Sarbari village in Rajasthan’s Sikar district. She continued sweeping for her livelihood since her honesty prevented her from indulging in practices, which are usually adopted by persons occupying similar positions to make quick money. According to the gram panchayat secretary, ‘she has the support of the whole village because she is capable. She also enjoys all the support from her husband who helps her in her ventures’. In another case, Sonia a low caste Kol and panchayat pradhan of Nihin village in Uttar Pradesh took up developmental schemes of the government to reach out to the poorest Kols, something that has never happened before. The village school that was used for stacking fodder started functioning. Sonia has also been able to free the land allotted to 10 landless families. In spite of stiff opposition from the upper caste, influential and rich people in the village, she survived with her courage and conviction (Gill, 2006:88). In Gujarat, a false case of corruption and misuse of office was filed against an upright dalit woman sarpanch, Shakriben, who was doing a commendable job which led to her removal. But she fought back and with the people’s support was reinstated (Awasthy, 2006:280). In spite of adverse circumstances, elected women candidates are honest in nature, do not indulge in corrupt practices and are accurate in presenting issues to the decision-making bodies and authorities (Sree Kumar, 2006: 617 and Singh, 2009:25).

Women sarpanches have also alerted the government about its wrong doings. In one such instance, the Rajasthan government fixed Rs. 5 as the budget for preparing 1 kg of ghughri (a dish made from gram) as the mid-day meal for school children. Due to such a meagre amount allocated, the basic costs for preparation of the meal could not be met. Looking at the predicament, Premlata, the sarpanch took up the challenge, successfully secured the cooperation of other women of
the village and undertook the responsibility of cooking the meal. As a result, the children of the school were served a different meal every day. Women led by Premlata now ensured that school children not only were served the meal daily but also ate it properly and thus motivated children to come to school regularly. Moreover, women in panchayats have earned the place of repute for India. For example, Tiliya Devi, a member of Lakhnore Block panchayat in Bihar was one among the 92 women from India and 158 from South Asia who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005. She emerged as a powerful panchayat leader during her struggle to free 156 acres of land belonging to one of the most downtrodden communities of Bihar, which was encroached upon by upper caste men. Despite having been deserted by her husband for taking up the cause of the dalits, she continued to struggle. She also initiated the creation of Gram Kosh (village fund) where villagers contributed Rs. 15 every month. This has helped in creating a strong financial support base for emergency situations like marriage, health problems, etc. (Gill, 2006:86 and 89).

Focusing on the importance of women in the panchayati raj system, it is evident that women played the role of personality development, promotion of education, community service and solidarity, arresting alcoholism, reversal of dependence, crackdown of crimes and role reversal (Borain, 2003:521). They have exhibited their leadership in solving some of the local problems and creating facilities for betterment of rural society (Singh, 2009:25). A significant milestone has been achieved in dealing with village issues particularly water and sanitation, poverty alleviation through self-help, generating awareness and uplift of weaker sections of society. Moreover, in many states like Rajasthan and Haryana, poor women have improved their socio-economic status by forming self help groups (SHGs). These examples only drive home the point that women leaders will go to any lengths to empower other women and change society; thus acceptability of women as leaders is the need of the hour.

ROLE OF NGOS IN THE PROCESS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In India, a number of voluntary organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have endeavoured towards the cause of women and have expanded the tradition of grassroots activism since the mid-’80s. The collective reach of NGOs represents an important element in the overall picture related to women’s political awareness and emancipation to make grassroots democracy result-oriented and meaningful. Although NGOs do not have sufficient experience in politics, yet many have appeared on the scene as the government has been unable to deliver. The approach of NGOs are integrated and holistic in nature which can be ascertained through their work. Firstly, by creating organisation programmes for dalits, minorities, landless and labour in the organised and unorganised sectors. Secondly,
training programmes in the areas of leadership development, capacity building, group dynamics and management-like perspective, that NGOs have adopted: Singamma Srinivasan Foundation and the Hunger Project (SEARCH), Utsahi Mahila Abhyudaya (UMA), Karnataka, Foundation for Research in Community Health (FRCH), Maharashtra, Child in Need Institute (CINI), West Bengal and Young India Project (YIP), Andhra Pradesh. Thirdly, engendering the panchayati raj institutions (PRI) — organising women in the areas of health, promoting and encouraging self help groups (SHGs) to help the poor and meet their urgent credit needs through thrift; housing, water and sanitation, education and watershed development. The opportunities provided by the small groups dealing with the above issues have been a kind of ‘testing ground’ for women to enter the larger arena, having been empowered in the smaller arena of panchayati raj; Fourthly, women in PRIs who have been supported and nurtured by NGOs and those who have been involved in larger people’s movements have gained a more ‘assertive’ stance which gives them an edge over other men in the PRI process. The best examples of this can be seen in the Right to Information movement in Rajasthan and the anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh (mirror.undp.org).

NGOs use women collectives such as SHGs or sanghas to create an arena for dialogue and discussion on issues that concern women and the community. SHGs, independently or in support of NGOs, enhance the equality of status of women as participants, decision-makers and beneficiaries in the democratic, economic, social and cultural spheres of life. Using the SHGs as a safe place, NGOs have provided various trainings and workshops, raising awareness of their political rights that were guaranteed in the constitutional amendments, as well as raising women’s knowledge of their general rights with regard to social, economic and political arenas. Self-help groups and sanghas are one form of women’s grassroots collectives that are being employed as a tool of empowerment. The relationship between the women’s collectives and the NGOs is that the latter initiates and supports the formation of groups, facilitates and provides resources and ensures their ongoing development. Therefore, when the rotating seat of a woman candidate arrived at their area, the group would act as a base of female leadership. The women would be informed on the wants and needs of the community, and be motivated, trained and confident. Not only would they provide candidates to contest elections but also provide support and act as an avenue of accountability to the constituency (www.ecommons.uwinnipeg.ca).

The Mahila Samakhya (MS) and the Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK) of Uttarakhand have made significant progress by forming, spreading and nurturing SHGs. However, the NGOs have been subjected to limited progress due to one or more reasons such as: corruption in panchayati raj, hostile environment
where PRIs are pitted against them (mirror.undp.org) and party guidelines which dominate the independent functioning of the panchayat member. For example, in West Bengal, women representatives have put up with the policies and programmes of political parties which nominate them to fight the elections and the cadre of the parties have now entrenched themselves into PRI institutions (www.geocities.com). But, if PRIs are the forums where development and politics have to be wedded, it is difficult to see how NGOs can stay non-aligned in the process, because most are bound by the donor’s conditions or avoid working against the ‘establishment’.

**POLITICS OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION AND PROBLEMS**

In India, women’s participation is generally lower either because they have been socialised differently (especially as far as marriage, motherhood, employment and property ownership are concerned), or because they have fewer resources. An implicit assumption in these sets of arguments is that the lower levels of participation of women are mostly the result of a process of socialisation that leads them to think of political activity in a different way than men. In other words, women don’t take as active a part in political life because they don’t think (as autonomous actors) that political participation is important. An implication that follows from this line of reasoning is that women do not think that entering political life would necessarily be advantageous for if they did, as autonomous actors they would participate (www.worldvaluessurvey.org). The politics of women is in a dilemma — should such women work merely for the improvement of women or stand for the electorate comprising both women and men? If they prioritise the women’s cause, then the impediments will be from the dominated male panchayat members and village community; if they work for a common cause, the issue of women empowerment would be sidelined. Moreover, there are several fault lines in the formation of caste, tribe, religion and poverty, and there is no one approach that can be developed. Hence, the problem is complicated in determining selective beneficiaries or target groups and programmes of action.

The structural aspects, such as problems of funding and rotation of reserved women constituencies, are important hurdles in the process of independent, effective and successful functioning of a woman sarpanch. Most times, she has to depend on the Block Development Officer (BDO) for funds. Hence, this dependency can handicap the vision of women candidates and they find it difficult for timely intervention and concrete action on working towards resolving problems and implementing various programmes.

Recently, some sarpanches blamed government policy, as there is no consistency of reservation in a particular seat for a long period. Because of the rotation of reserved women seats, a seat which is reserved for one election goes unreserved for the next. Thus, a woman panchayat
member who served for one term successfully may not be able to seek re-election from the same constituency and thus reservation serves no meaningful purpose and empowerment barely achieved by them (Satpathy, 2002).

In India, since the mandatory introduction of panchayati raj institutions, many achievements and progress have been made to empower women through the participatory democracy of panchayati raj. However, its achievement and progress is subjected to a litmus test in the light of problems and obstacles in the genuine political participation and empowerment of women. Many instances could be cited to prove this. The all-women panchayats in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Tripura and women representatives in tribal areas have become very active with progressive results. But this does not mean that all have been well. In 1995, a workshop of elected women panchayat members of these states made an embarrassing revelation that most women were surrogates for male family members and exercised no powers and functions. Most of these women were illiterate and lived in purdah. They were escorted by male members who not only took active part in deliberation but also took decisions. Thus women are considered inferior to their male counterparts. They are leaders but only on paper. Their powers are used by their husbands. Moreover, the harsh reality is that most husbands in our society would not allow their sarpanch, wife to settle a civil suit where she has to visit police stations, probably be subjected to abuse by the police, exchange nasty verbal duels with opposition parties etc. (Saini and Singh, 2001: 29).

In Alwar (Rajasthan), it was found that a young woman pradhan of the panchayat would sit with her face covered during meetings as her father-in-law was regularly presiding over the meeting. It has also been found that women members did not even attend the meetings of the panchayats. In other places, their importance was seen as members who could be used only for fulfilling the required quorum without which the meeting could not be held. Once this was met, they were sidelined and their functions taken over by their husbands. The Bassi Panchayat Samiti in Rajasthan passed a resolution condemning Bhawari Devi, an alleged victim of gang rape for her crusade, against the crime which brought a ‘bad’ name to the village. When the resolution to this effect was passed, many of the women members were not present. They were represented by their husbands and the women members present were guided by their husbands not to oppose the resolution. After the panchayati raj election was successfully conducted, the Rajasthan government discovered that women members were unaware of their rights and functions as members or presiding offices of the panchayat. Though there is a training programme launched for elected women representative along with the males, in many cases the women did not attend the meeting due to pressure from their husbands because there were no separate training programmes for women (Awasthy, 2006:278).
Dalit women get trapped in the vortex of both the patriarchal order and caste system. In Madhya Pradesh, a woman class sarpanch from a backward caste was stripped naked during an extended panchayat meeting in the presence of the Block Development Officer (BDO) when she refused to comply with the demands of her male counterparts. Caste politics has created a ‘bad name’ in Uttar Pradesh where the intention of political parties is largely to secure, hold and sustain power through caste support rather than the real development of the caste and state as a whole. In 1995, the election to panchayati raj institutions was held after the Supreme Court jurisdiction. However, writ petitions were filed against as many as 25 districts where the reservation quota of Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes (OBC) and women went far above 50%, a limit set-up by the Supreme Court for reservation. It was alleged that Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav was taking caste politics to the grassroots level. The state government delimited the panchayat areas which not only changed the geographical boundaries but also the caste composition of Gram Sabhas. As a result, the villages that were dominated by upper castes had pradhans from lower castes. But this was met with a violent reaction when a dozen lower caste pradhans, including women pradhans were killed, a price they paid for becoming the heads of upper caste dominated villages. Opposition parties criticised the manner in which election to the panchayati raj bodies was held and alleged that Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav has used the panchayati raj not for decentralisation of power, but concentration of power by mobilising people on the caste lines (Awasthy, 2006:278).

Political parties cannot be blamed alone — illiteracy and patriarchy are also equally responsible. For example, Sudha Pai’s study of three villages in Meerut district in Uttar Pradesh brought out the sorry state of affairs and proved how reservation measures have failed to produce the desired results. The study reveals that women pradhans are only there in ‘name’ — the women revealed that they had contested the election due to family pressures and the decision of their community. Regarding panchayat matters, they professed their ignorance and advised the researcher to interview their husbands instead. This led to the rise of the concept of ‘Panchayat Pati’ (Datta, 2001:32). The macro surveys conducted by the State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development in West Bengal proved that a few lower caste panchayat members had participated in different movements on social issues. The fact, however, remains that many of them cannot still perceive their roles properly. The study has shown that the impact of reservation on women’s participation has been differential (Datta, 2001:32). Given the low profile of the women in panchayat matters, it is relatively easy for husbands to dominate the panchayat from behind the scene.

A study conducted by Satpathy (2002) in Orissa reveals that the list for the women candidature was finalised either by the husband,
brother-in-law or senior male member. It is very strange, as the one who is contesting the election did not attend the meeting where her candidature was finalised. In the same study, he found that most of the elected leaders had no knowledge about their role, major projects and funding. The sarpanch and nominees said that they consult local party leaders before going to any meeting. These disabilities were compounded by the fact that many of these women owed their elected position to their husband or influential politician or person. In order to fulfil the reserved quota, political workers have to deploy various strategies to convince the women and one of the most adopted strategies is to influence the women through their family members (Mahanta and Sinha, 2007). Hence, rural women leaders are ‘leaders through’ their husbands or some other male relative. Thus, they may be classified as passive spectators who are unable to strike their entry to actual panchayat decision-making and decision execution. This phenomenon is even more apparent in the case of women belonging to SCs or STs.

The stimuli for women to participate in the political process is provided by political parties. They are the intermediaries, linking the social forces and ideologies to official government institutions and relating them to political action within the community. Political parties chalk out programmes broad enough to cover the entire range of political activity and make the issues and interest known to the masses. The political background of women shows that they are way beyond an equal status along with men. Women are politically inactive and do not come forward to participate in public affairs. Though women become members of political parties, this percentage is very low. For example, if a constituency is unreserved, a woman candidate is hardly preferred, and if there is reservation, then it is the political party or community that decides the candidature. In many instances, it is found that women enter into politics not of their own will, rather the will and pressure of their family.

In Orissa, research has indicated that most women had contested elections under pressure from different quarters. Their husbands stand proxy for them in panchayat meetings (Datta, 2001:32). The research carried out by the Institute of Social Science reveals that in the period 1997–2000, most women in Karnataka did not visit affiliated bodies at district headquarters except when the meetings were held; many times men escorted and accompanied them to the meeting hall and were prompted to speak. If any woman wanted to raise an issue she chose to speak about it to the chairperson or vice chairperson after the meeting was over. But fear and diffidence to express in a public meeting looms large among women (Pargunan, 2007: 13-14). About 60% women panchayat members in India are unaware of the panchayat mission. A little more than one-fourth are ignorant about their role and responsibilities and assume that their duty is to attend meetings when
the sarpanch summons them. Sexual harassment apart, they are
denied their position and power in their brush with officials. Most
representatives feel frustrated when they interact with officials (Datta,

Lack of proper education and necessary orientation are hurdles for
women to play an effective role in the panchayats. Social obligations
and traditional control of women folk by family members and their
commitment to household work also serve as obstacles in permitting
women representatives to function effectively. The Kerala experience
as gathered from the discussions in the International Conference on
Democratic Decentralization (2000) tends to demonstrate that despite
the tradition of progressive movements and high literacy, women
representatives had faced many difficulties in the initial years. Many
were unwilling entrants into the tumultuous world of elective office
because of the wrath of their families for keeping late hours and
neglecting the home (Pargunan, 2007:13-14). Moreover, the panchayati
raj institutions still do not enjoy fiscal autonomy.

In a patriarchal structure, women never enjoy justice. They are not
allowed in public places and, if allowed, they face humiliation at the
hands of colleagues, community members and bureaucrats and works
as second fiddle to their husbands in discharging duties. In some states
like Uttar Pradesh, male candidates are manipulating no-confidence
motion to drive women out from panchayats, and more in the case of
dalit women. Even in advanced and well-educated states like Kerala,
women presidents face a lot of difficulty, harassment and humiliation.
For example, in Thruvely gram panchayat of Kerala, the president
experienced great difficulties when she was serving her term. A
colleague’s husband once stormed into the meeting and dragged his
wife out and abused her. The other members in the meeting did not
defend her; instead they joined to make her resign. Reference may also
be made to the infamous incident of Adiamma in Andhra Pradesh. She
was performing well and became very popular with the people. Her
male colleagues became envious and organised a no-confidence motion
against her, and she was defeated (Datta, 2001:33). The bureaucracy in
rural areas has proved to be gender insensitive and aligns with the
rural male elites. In Tamil Nadu, 66 out of the 98 panchayat presidents
removed by the collectors were women. In Andhra Pradesh, the
‘Janmabhoomi’ programme was not a real success of grassroots
democracy because it bypassed local bodies like gram panchayat and
mandal parishads by bureaucratic mechanisms (Haragopal and

Women’s groups and movements have approached the state and
pressurised it to frame a pro-woman policy. While the state has framed
seemingly pro-women policies, these have actually not helped to break
sexual stereotypes and male dominance. The policies have not been able
to achieve the objective of equality and political development. As a result,
women continue to have contradictory experiences with regard to state policies and this raises the question as to how women should relate to the state and what strategies should be adopted towards the state on account of its unwillingness to change the status quo to help women genuinely. Doubts have been raised as to whether any more demands should be made to the state for more policies. It has been observed that due to various reasons, which include pressures of national, international and the women’s movement, studies of international aid agencies and political and electoral considerations, the state has resorted to a ‘symbolic’ political, electoral considerations and policy makings without bringing in any real changes in the lives of women. While this has provided the state with a pro-woman image, it has a depoliticising effect on the movement. Unfortunately, the rural women’s organisations, though poorly organised are very feeble in most states to articulate their interest before the government and government officials.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION**

Empowerment of women at the grassroots level has to be cultivated to transform the state of helplessness and passivity of the social structure to a state of hope and action. Unfortunately, neither the Centre nor the state governments have put forward specific legislations to deal with the problems of women at the panchayati raj level and empower them politically. Similarly, the role of NGOs and SHGs has not proved significantly; the constitutional and legal steps are under scrutiny; and gender bias based on a patriarchal notion of sex-role stereotype obstacles the successful performance of elected women representatives in the process of political participation at the village level. The existing problems in the system of panchayati raj should be looked at with recommendations for necessary changes to make women’s participation in tune and temper of democratic decentralisation and empowerment of rural women. Important steps and measures for this purpose can be attributed through the following interventions which will prove to have far-reaching implications:

- The basic problems of women at the rural level need to be addressed and resolved because the poor and dalit elected representatives, who depend on daily wage and income, do not show their enthusiasm for attending meetings regularly, and it is true that social and political development at the panchayat level cannot be successful by sacrificing their basic needs. Therefore, it is necessary to compensate them for their loss. If income and social security improved, women would automatically become self-dependent and the pivotal force of elected members in panchayat will reckon.

- Channelise the welfare and women-centric programmes in a proper, time-bound and result-oriented manner by which the target groups will be the real beneficiary.
• The panchayati raj institutions in India are running into an acute financial problem. For their economy, they have to depend on the state government. In the absence of fiscal autonomy and shortage of funds they will be unable to implement the plans and programmes successfully. As a result, the credibility of the women’s performance comes to question. There is the need of real and substantial areas of revenue generation and reasonable devolution of power for this purpose by the state governments.

• The state administration should spearhead gender sensitisation, and it would be possible by training its personnel at all levels to view women as important political entities capable of shouldering responsibilities, introduce regular gender sensitive reorientation programmes for the MPs, MLAs, villagers, bureaucrats and office bearers of the panchayat.

• In the present context, the national and state commissions for women set up by the government have the mandate only to recommend to the government. They lack the power to take appropriate and effective measures to address the various issues concerning women and to modify or correct the existing policies and schemes formulated by the government towards their development and empowerment. To make the commissions vibrant and successful, they should have power like the National Commission of Minorities and Human Rights Commission.

• There is the lack of mechanism to monitor and observe the incidence of violence against elected women in rural areas. The establishment of Women’s Rights Commission in each district will bridge the gap.

• One-third reservation for women in all levels of the parties to be introduced through electoral reforms. Apart from this, in the political party hierarchy, there should be efforts to have at least a minimum of 33% women in all levels of decision-making.

• Highlighting, glorifying and rewarding women in politics who have successfully confronted maladministration and male hegemony. This will be a motivating factor to other women to enter into politics. The state NGOs, SHGs and individual efforts are required to streamline women success.

• Lack of information, awareness and financial resources make women easy targets of corrupt bureaucrats and politicians. Hence, state funding of the elections will generate a better environment which will promote women who generally have no control over their earnings and form the low-waged or non-waged strata of the society to contest elections and check the politics of ‘influence and power’.

• The present training system and facilities for elected members is totally inadequate. Hence, the state government must immediately
allocate adequate resources for conducting capacity-building programmes for the elected women representatives and functionaries of PRIs. The training programme should include topics like roles and responsibilities of women representatives, which should include information about present day functioning of the system, local body elections, and legal competencies of various tiers, set up Panchayat Training Centres for women at least one in each division, strengthen the capacity-building and skill upgradation through crash courses for illiterate women members, and internet access for information, communication and competency.

- The interaction and cooperation of the bureaucrats at the grassroots level has to be improved and for this purpose the proper arrangement of interactive and training programmes dealing with panchayati raj functionaries will serve the purpose tangibly.

- Rather than seeking permission for each technical issue, it will be better if a technical manual is prepared giving relevant information on the common types of rural work which can be used by village panchayats without the need to refer their problems to the junior engineers and officials always.

- NGOs should use existing women’s groups as the fora for discussion and create others with several stakeholders to dialogue, mobilise public opinion and network with existing women groups.

- NGOs to create awareness among women through mass media, right to information and e-governance.

- Information technologists and social workers should work together imbibing skills from one another.

- Initiative by the state government to generate dialogue with political parties at state and national levels to address the problem and come out with constructive plans and programmes. This will be possible with the formation of a forum consisting NGOs, social workers, cabinet ministers, feminists, chief ministers and panchayati raj ministers of each state and experts of grassroots democracy.

- Women’s collectives like SHGs and *sanghas* should do more for encouraging, supporting and facilitating the women’s involvement within the panchayats both as a candidate and as an aware citizen.

- NGOs cannot empower all women with the same tool. There are cracks in the system due to violence, caste and religion. Despite the success stories of women’s collectives, NGOs must be aware of these women who fall through the cracks. Because if the NGOs themselves do not attempt to reach out to them, there is no guarantee if the women’s collectives, the female elected representative or anyone else will.
There should be stringent laws to check the proxy role of the husband or in-laws. Women members should be suspended from their position if found guilty of allowing the family members to take part in decision-making in public places.

More stringent laws should be made for those who abuse and assault women representatives on caste and gender lines.

Some of the statutory provisions should be amended such as the rotation of reservation of seats for women. The existing laws speaks of rotation of seats and office of chairperson [Art 243D (III and IV)] but for women in the Indian context, a period of five years has proved as a period of learning and only in the second and third terms have women representatives started showing their real performance. Hence, rotation should be only after 15 years. Likewise, one-third reservation [Art 243D (II and III)] is not sufficient for passing the bills and proposals which are gender sensitive and empowerment-oriented. Hence, 50% reservations at the panchayati raj level will enable women to get their issues addressed, passed and implemented in a more effective manner.

Apart from the state, NGOs, collective and individual efforts, legal and statutory measures, the need of the hour is to change societal stereotypes, gender bias, patriarchal and feudal mindset of the people. This requires a revolutionary spread of information and education among men and women and determination for change. The men should shoulder the responsibility for the miserable plight of the women in society and work sincerely for gender equality starting at the grassroots level. Similarly, women should defy the existing odds such as regressive restrictions and the rigid role differentiations based on gender, and should be conscious of their own rights and duties, powers and responsibilities in the framework of panchayati raj.

CONCLUSION

Women in panchayats constitute the basic buildings of democracy and a means for the reconstruction of India from below. In this context, political participation of women in India through the panchayati raj system has provided them an arena of freedom, progress, confidence, participation and exposure to the outside world. Today, the quest for the woman's role in panchayati raj is noticeable. Women have started asserting themselves leading to new kind of situation in society. Reservation of seats by the constitution has given them an unprecedented opportunity and has created conditions for a sort of social revolution. Yet, in the process of progress, there are impediments, and women are discouraged from seeking political office due to their ignorance, discriminatory attitude and practices by others, family and child care responsibilities, rigid caste structure and the high
cost of seeking and holding public office. Their family members have compelled them to take up their roles in the form of proxy incumbents by the rigid boundaries drawn by the male dominated patriarchal social structure and mindset. The government is also apathetic to the problems of women at the local self-government level.

Despite the constraints and criticisms, the socio-economic situation and the patriarchal value prevailing in our society, the full-grown political empowerment of women in India at the grassroots level is a difficult task but not impossible. The centuries old problems that beset women cannot be solved in one-and-half decade; however, the movement has started to revitalise and re-energise women role in the grassroots democracy, and has had some achievements on its hand. The mission of empowerment of women through panchayati raj is not a failure but a transformation and a beginning to reach the higher trajectory. In order to keep the transformation process sustainable, a fresh look should be given by which impediments will be removed to make the mission of women empowerment genuine, effective and result-oriented at the grassroost level.

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