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Democracy, Gender And Self-Determination: Gram Panchayats And Indian Women

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ABSTRACT:

India has made significant progress in enhancing the involvement and influence of women in democratic decentralization and policymaking. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which women participate in Gram Panchayats, focusing on themes of equity, socioeconomic justice, and democratic decentralization. The paper is structured into three sections. The first section examines the current level of women's participation in Gram Panchayats and the impact of existing socio-legal frameworks in improving their socio-political standing while fostering grassroots institutions. Additionally, this section will analyze the contributions of Self-Help Groups alongside direct engagement. The second section addresses the challenges faced by female representatives and participants, providing a comprehensive overview of these issues and investigating their underlying causes to propose effective solutions. The paper aims to highlight how women's perspectives and sensibilities influence these grassroots democratic institutions, shedding light on previously neglected aspects of decision-making and prioritization. The final section identifies potential areas for enhancing female participation and empowering both women and democratic institutions. This study employs descriptive and historical methodologies to offer a theoretical analysis of the evolving roles of women at the grassroots level.

In general, we found that affirmative action does ensure that larger numbers of women enter politics but it does not ensure that the women participate in politics and function as electe representatives, because of lack of education. Empowerment needs to be seen as a holistic outcome of processes of critical education that enables women to lead autonomous lives and the freedom to act. Both affirmative action and education are necessary to empower women who have suffered discrimination and lack of power always.

Index Terms - Education, Empowerment, Self-Help Groups, Gender, Women, Panchayati Raj

1. INTRODUCTION:

India is a vast and diverse country, with a population of over 1.3 billion people, the majority of whom reside in rural areas. Rural India faces numerous challenges, including poverty, illiteracy, and lack of basic infrastructure, which impact the quality of life of millions of people. To address these challenges, India has adopted a decentralized system of governance, known as Panchayat Raj. The Panchayat Raj system is based on the principle of democratic decentralization, where local bodies are empowered to manage their affairs and promote development at the grassroots level. The system of Panchayat Raj in India has been evolving since the 1950s and has undergone significant changes over the years. The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 provided constitutional status to Panchayat Raj institutions, ensuring their autonomy and empowering them with the responsibility of rural governance. One of the most significant changes introduced by the 73rd Amendment Act was the reservation of one-third of seats for women in Panchayat Raj institutions. The reservation of seats for women has played a vital role in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in India, providing women with an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process at the grassroots level.

Women constitute 46 percent of the total 1.341 million elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) throughout the nation¹. While some female elected officials have initiated positive changes, many others face significant challenges, often requiring permission from their husbands or family members to attend a single Gram Sabha. Issues such as poverty, illiteracy, lack of family support, and unwelcoming attitudes from villagers pose daily obstacles for numerous women Sarpanch and Gram Panchayat members. In states like Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, women Sarpanch have introduced new priorities in local policy-making and have notably shifted villagers² perspectives. However, there remains a considerable journey ahead for increased female participation. Analyzing the underlying causes of resistance or barriers will be essential in developing a training and policy framework aimed at empowering the women of rural India.

2. OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this research paper on “Democracy, Gender and Self-Determination : Gram Panchayats and Indian Women” are as follows:

- To examine the historical and current status of women's empowerment in India.
- To identify the role of panchayats in promoting women's rights and gender equality.
- To identify the challenges and barriers faced by women in participating in panchayat Raj Institutions and assess the effectiveness of current strategies for promoting women's participation.
- To understand the role of Panchayat Raj Institutions in Promoting gender equality, Democracy, Self Determination and women's empowerment in India.

¹ Women Constitute 46 Per Cent Representation In Panchayati System: Minister' (www.ndtv.com, 2017) <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/women-constitute-46-per-cent-representation-in-panchayati-systemminister-1256125>

² Abha Sharma, 'Discarding Veils, Embracing Change: Rajasthan's Extraordinary Women Sarpanches' (www.thebetterindia.com, 2017) <https://www.thebetterindia.com/13654/discarding-veils-embracing-changerajsthans-extraordinary-women-sarpanches>

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The concept of Panchayat Raj, or local self-government, has its roots in ancient India where village councils were responsible for resolving local disputes and maintaining law and order. However, the modern Panchayat Raj system in India was established through a series of constitutional amendments in the 1990s. The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 made provisions for the establishment of a three-tier system of Panchayat Raj institutions in rural areas, consisting of Gram Panchayats at the village level, Panchayat Samitis at the block level, and Zila Parishads at the district level. Similarly, the 74th Amendment Act of 1992 made provisions for the establishment of a three-tier system of urban local bodies in urban areas. The Panchayat Raj system was envisaged as a means of decentralizing power and promoting local governance, with the objective of ensuring greater participation of citizens in decision-making processes and promoting grassroots democracy. The Panchayat Raj institutions were given the responsibility of planning and implementing development programs at the local level, including the implementation of various poverty alleviation programs, provision of basic services such as water supply and sanitation, and infrastructure development. Over the years, the Panchayat Raj system has evolved to become a vital component of India's democratic framework, with increasing emphasis on the participation of women in local governance. The reservation of seats for women in Panchayat Raj institutions has been a key policy measure aimed at promoting women's empowerment and increasing their representation in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. Today, the Panchayat Raj system is widely recognized as an important means of promoting democratic governance and empowering marginalized sections of society, including women.

The Rig Veda references the Sabha and Samiti, which were assemblies where village elders convened to assist the Rajan in making policy decisions. The texts also indicate that women participated in these gatherings alongside their husbands³. In later periods, as observed in subsequent history, villages maintained a degree of self-sufficiency and local governance. Although the Uttaramerur inscription provides insights into Chola village administration, there is a lack of definitive evidence regarding women's involvement in these assemblies. While the Panchayat system persisted for an extended period in Indian villages, with local hereditary officials⁴ overseeing the revenue system, the contemporary model of local self-government began to emerge only with the arrival of British rule in India.

4. CURENT SITUATION:

The understanding of the existing socio-political scenario is necessary in formulating a cohesive policy for the empowerment of Gram Panchayats through women's participation. After the 2009 central approval for 50% reservation of seats for the female candidates in local self-government institutions, the number of women elected in PRI's has rose to 46.14% of the total elected representatives⁵. However, we need to look much beyond this facade to analyse the situation in which these representatives work, the policies that are near and dear to them and the work they wish to take up.

³ Upinder Singh, A History Of Ancient And Early Medieval India: From The Stone Age To 12Th Century (7th edn, Pearson 2009). 188-192

⁴ J L Mehta, Advanced Study in the History of Medieval India (2nd edn, Sterling Publishers Private Limited 1979) 171

⁵ Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, 'Status of Representation Of Women In Pris' (2016).

There are two paths in which women engage with Gram Panchayats. One, those who contest and win (or lose) elections at the village levels. Two, those who participate in the Gram Sabhas and not in the politically motivated electoral process. Both the process being equally important for the empowerment and participation of women in grassroots politics, an attempt has been made to look at them separately.

(i). **The Contestants:**

Engagement with the Gram Panchayats starts with filling up the nomination forms and for those who win, continues till one's term is ended. It has been observed⁶ that a whopping 76% of the women candidates in Gram Panchayat elections attribute their husbands, family or other relations as the source of their motivation to participate in the electoral process while only 7% agree that they are self-motivated. As to the electoral process, more women participate in filling up the nomination forms, the big number being attributed to the fact that the Election Commission has made it mandatory for the candidate to be physically present. This is contrasted by a very low participation in non-mandatory but nonetheless important activities like collection of funds. Without denying the crucial role reservations have played in increasing the representation of women, the author would like to point out that these women might not have been able to enter the governance system if not for the constitutional mandate⁷.

(ii). **The Participants:**

While 27% of those who do participate in Gram Sabhas were found to be participating always and 29% participated often, meaningful deliberations and productive participation still seems like a distant dream for many of the womenfolk. This is because only 34% of the woman surveyed had actively participated in a Gram Sabha. When prodded about the reasons of non-participation, 34% of the women cited male domination as the primary reason, and 17% said gender discrimination exists in Panchayats.

It can be seen that in processes where the presence of a candidate is mandatory, like the filling up of the nomination form, greater participation is seen. While in more „optional, nonetheless crucial for election activities like collection of funds, the participation is close to none. Additionally, while the women are attending Gram Sabhas, they are not voicing their opinions effectively. What the data conveys is very clear, representation and participation are two very distinct processes. What 50% reservation ensures is the representation of women. And there exist a plethora of social, economic and cultural reasons hindering the full participation of women in Gram Panchayats.

⁶ Goutam Sadhu and Chandra Bhushan Sharma, 'Factors Influencing Participation of Women In Panchayati Raj Institution: A Study Of Rajasthan' (2014) 3 International Journal of Science and Research <<https://www.ijsr.net/archive/v3i11/T0NUMTQxNTQx.pdf>

⁷ Ganapathy Palanithurai, Dynamics Of New Panchayati Raj System In India: Empowering Women (Concept Publishing Company 2002).58

5. WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN PANCHAYATS:

Women's leadership in Panchayats has had a significant impact on promoting gender equality and empowering women in India. Women representatives have played a critical role in addressing issues that disproportionately affect women and marginalized communities.

Studies have shown that women representatives in Panchayats are more likely to prioritize issues such as education, health, and sanitation, which have a direct impact on the lives of women and girls. They are also more likely to challenge patriarchal norms and practices, promote gender-sensitive policies, and advocate for women's rights. Furthermore, women representatives have been instrumental in increasing women's access to basic services, such as healthcare, education, and sanitation. They have also played a vital role in improving the livelihoods of women through initiatives such as self-help groups, microfinance, and skill-building programs.

Women's leadership in Panchayats has also contributed to improving the overall quality of governance. Studies have shown that Panchayats with a higher representation of women have better service delivery, increased transparency, and accountability. Women representatives have been found to be more accessible to the community and more responsive to their needs. Moreover, women's leadership in Panchayats has also had a positive impact on reducing gender-based violence and discrimination. Women representatives have been at the forefront of advocating for measures to prevent and address violence against women, including setting up committees to address domestic violence and sexual harassment.

Despite the significant progress made, women's leadership in Panchayats continues to face challenges. Women representatives often lack the necessary resources, support, and training to fulfil their roles effectively. They also face gender-based discrimination and violence, which can deter them from participating in decision-making processes. To address these challenges, there is a need for greater investment in capacity building programs for women representatives, increased financial and administrative support, and stronger measures to address gender-based violence and discrimination.

6. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS:

Despite the reservation of seats for women in Panchayat Raj institutions, women in India continue to face several challenges and barriers in participating in local governance. Some of these challenges and barriers are:

(i). Social Barriers:

In India, women's participation in public life is often viewed with suspicion and disapproval. Women are expected to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers, limiting their participation in politics and public life. The legal mechanisms for reservations have not been helpful in changing the traditional approach of the society and the family members towards women who are assuming leadership and participatory positions in their villages. Their participation is still being perceived as an act of rebel, or a „permission“ that they have

been granted by their male counterparts. Moreover, innumerable accounts have been reported where women candidates were used merely as proxies for retaining power by the male politicians⁸.

(ii). **Economic Dependence:**

A study published by the Ministry of Women and Child Development⁹ states that 100% of the elected as well as general female members of Gram Sabhas think that unemployment is the primary reason behind them being treated unequally by the male members. Economic dependence plays a crucial role in changing the perception of women about themselves and adds to their self-confidence. A case in point is the participants of various Self-help Groups (SHGs) where their say in family matters increased when they started to earn from the SHG's business. The hitherto mentioned data about marginal participation of women in election funding processes also points a finger towards their economic dependence. This situation hampers the participation in two ways. Firstly, it becomes easier to place a dependent candidate as a proxy. And secondly, the voices and opinions of the dependent women from households are neglected during the Gram Sabhas and their husband's or relation's opinions are taken as their opinions as well.

(iii). **Lack of Education and Training:**

Many women in rural India lack education and training, which hinders their ability to participate effectively in local governance. They may lack the necessary skills and knowledge to understand and address the needs of their communities.

(iv). **Patriarchal Attitudes:**

Patriarchal attitudes and beliefs can create barriers to women's participation in local governance. Men in leadership positions may not take women's opinions seriously or may actively work to undermine their authority.

(v). **Lack of Resources:**

Women candidates in Panchayat Raj elections often lack the financial resources and support necessary to run effective campaigns. This can limit their ability to connect with voters and promote their candidacy effectively.

(vi). **Limited Mobility:**

Many women in rural India face restrictions on their mobility, which can limit their ability to attend meetings and participate in local governance. This can also make it challenging for women to access training and resources necessary for effective governance.

⁸ Brijesh Kumar, 'Sarpanch By Proxy Governance Now (2017) <<http://www.governancenow.com/views/columns/sarpanch-proxy>>

⁹ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 'Problems And Prospects Of Emerging Women Leadership In Scheduled Tribes In Rajasthan

(vii). Cooperation and Confidence:

Elected members of the Gram Sabhas often face hostile environments while working with their male subordinates. The orders given are often not followed and the decision-making process is stalled. While we are lauding the emergence of All-Women Gram Panchayats in many states, the fact that such Panchayats also emerge because the male members do not wish to work with the females should not be ignored¹⁰. While the Gram Sabhas are a public affair, many participants hesitate to speak in front of the male members of the family and village elders and seem to be quiet in spite of having original and insightful ideas. Moreover, an alarming 91.67% female member surveyed¹¹ have stated that they do not participate in the decision-making process because of lack of confidence.

While there are incidental and individual reasons like observance of purdah for some or illiteracy for others, the above four have been included in this writing as the representative and underlying issues that female Gram Panchayat members and participants face. Before going into the details of what are the necessary steps to be taken to change this scenario, it is important to see what impact does participation have on the women who are participating vis-a-vis the influence they have on their respective Gram Panchayats.

(viii). Threats, Violence, Corruption and Character:

Women in Panchayat Raj institutions have reported facing threats and violence from opponents and detractors. This can create a climate of fear and intimidation, discouraging women from participating in local governance. The village politics in India has no longer remained the ideal of Mahatma Gandhi's imagination. It has become a breeding ground for money, muscle and manpower mafias. This situation makes it difficult for first-generation women contestants to contest and win or lose the elections. The elected candidates also face threats of violence, or character assassination from the leaders. An interview¹² of Jagrani Devi, the Gram Pradhan of Hamirpur in UP elected in the 2000 election, taken during a symposium in 2002, throws light on the issue very clearly wherein she states that, "Certain problems are always there. Some threaten you with your life whereas others want you to behave like a woman".

Addressing these challenges and barriers is critical to promoting women's participation in Panchayat Raj institutions and achieving gender equality in local governance. Efforts to address these challenges may include providing training and support to women candidates, promoting women's education and empowerment, and creating a safe and supportive environment for women's participation in local governance.

¹⁰ Seemanthini Niranjana, 'Gender Inflections Within Panchayat Raj', *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender, Social Inequality in India* (Kali for Women 2002).

¹¹ J M Deshmukh, A M Kshatriya and A V Shinde, 'Constraints Faced By Women Member Of Gram Panchayat' (2013) 8 Agriculture Update.

¹² Sahabhagi Shikshan Kendra, Interview with Jagrani Devi (2002).

7. IMPACT OF FEMALE PARTICIPATION:

A. On the Participants:

As the discussion above clearly points out, Gram Panchayats are a platform for public discussion and decision making. While many female participants still face the burden of their male counterparts or depend upon their husbands, etc., those who do participate willingly and productively have reported important changes in their behaviour and other's perception towards them. A sociological study of the role Gram Panchayats have played in the empowerment of women in Karnataka is a case in point¹³. The observations made by the surveyed women are as follows.

(i). Sociological impact:

It has been observed that the participation of women in Gram Sabhas can change their social status in their families as well as in villages. The hitherto unheard-of voices are presented by these women and, thus, they start commanding more respect from the villagers. Gram Sabhas also gives an opportunity to womenfolk to step out of their houses and participate in community building. They also become an integral part of the decision-making process. This has also been seen to reflect in their households and the participants have reported to gain more respect within their families too.

(ii). Economic impact:

70% of the women participants surveyed¹⁴ have stated that their standard of living conditions has increased due to taking up various administrative roles in the Gram Panchayats. However, this is truer in case of the elected females and not in the case of mere participants. Active involvement in economic decisions has also made many women capable to shoulder such responsibilities within their families and, thus, has increased the economic independence of these women.

(iii). Psychological impact:

Gram Sabhas have helped in increasing the self-confidence of the female participants. This is because, the village meetings give them an opportunity to voice their opinions and provide them with a sense of validation mostly lacking in an otherwise patriarchal family surrounding. This could be very clear from the fact that 86% of the females surveyed have stated that the participation in Gram Sabhas has decreased the inferiority complex they used to have.

B. On the Working of Gram Sabhas:

Women bring their own sense and sensibilities to the working of the Gram Sabhas. The points to be discussed and the way in which discussions happen change at the village level due to the presence of female members.

¹³ Kavya C N and Manjunatha S, 'A Sociological Study On The Role Of Gram Panchayats In Women Empowerment In Karnataka State' (2015) 7 IJCRR.

¹⁴ Kavya C N and Manjunatha S, 'A Sociological Study On The Role Of Gram Panchayats In Women Empowerment In Karnataka State' (2015) 7 IJCRR

(i). Issues taken up:

It has been observed that many female Sarpanch are keen on working on issues which have traditionally been ignored by the male members. Sanitation and education, for example, are the primary areas that gain focus with the females in offices. Also, the female participants discuss issues such as Girls Education more frequently. Female participation helps in making the policies of the Gram Panchayat more inclusive and diverse. In a nutshell, the female participants help in empowering other females of the village and make the environment more conducive for long-term changes.

(ii). Working of the Gram Panchayat:

It could be observed in many villages that the presence of women in office and in meetings have worked as a catalyst to bring down the level of violence. The traditional mindset, proving harmful in many areas works as a barrier for the male members to use physical or verbal abuse in the presence of women members, thus, reducing the level of violence in the workings of the Gram Sabha.

(iii). Corruption:

Higher level of women in government machinery is strongly associated with lower level of perceived corruption in democracies with higher electoral accountability¹⁵. While no blanket statements can be made regarding women officials in Gram Sabhas, these women have been traditionally seen to be less corrupt than their male counterparts. Having said that, it needs to be noted that the less corruption could be attributed to majority of the women officials being the first-time politicians or the general lack of economic dependence of these women participants.

A comparison between the reasons for women to not participate in the Gram Sabhas and the impact of their participation shows that their weaknesses start to change once they are given appropriate opportunities. But there still exist major flaws in both the initiation and participation mechanisms which we need to work on in order to make the Gram Panchayats a true vehicle of democratic decentralisation and inclusive empowerment.

8. PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA :**(i). Increasing Awareness:**

It is essential to increase awareness among women about their rights and the opportunities available to them through Panchayat Raj institutions. This can be achieved by conducting awareness campaigns, workshops, and training sessions for women in rural areas.

¹⁵ J Esarey and L A Shwindt-Bayer, 'Women's Representation, Accountability And Corruption In Democracies' (2017) 1 British Journal of Political Science.

(ii). Capacity Building:

Providing training and capacity building to women elected representatives will equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out their duties effectively. Training programs should focus on leadership, communication, conflict resolution, and decision-making.

(iii). Encouraging Women's Participation:

Encouraging women's participation in Panchayat Raj institutions can be achieved by providing financial and other support for women candidates. This can include scholarships, loans, and other financial assistance, as well as support in campaigning and accessing resources.

(iv). Addressing Social Barriers:

Addressing social barriers that prevent women from participating in local governance is critical. This can be done by involving men in promoting women's participation and by addressing cultural norms and traditions that limit women's involvement in public life.

(v). Creating Safe Spaces:

Creating safe spaces for women to participate in Panchayat Raj institutions is crucial. This can include providing security and protection for women elected representatives and ensuring that they can participate in meetings and discussions without fear of violence or intimidation.

(vi). Promoting Women's Empowerment:

Promoting women's empowerment through Panchayat Raj institutions can be achieved by ensuring that women have a voice in decision-making and that their opinions are valued. This can be done by promoting women's participation in leadership roles, ensuring that women have access to resources, and promoting gender equality in all aspects of governance.

Overall, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment through Panchayat Raj institutions require a multi-faceted approach that addresses the challenges and barriers faced by women in local governance. It requires a sustained effort to create an environment that is supportive of women's participation and empowers them to play an active role in decision-making at the grassroots level.

9. CONCLUSION:

The Panchayat Raj system has played a crucial role in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality in India. The reservation of seats for women in local governments has led to greater participation of women in decisionmaking processes, which has resulted in more inclusive and equitable policies. Women's representation in Panchayats has also increased their visibility, status, and social capital, which has translated into better access to resources and opportunities.

However, despite these achievements, women's participation in Panchayats still faces many challenges, including patriarchy, socio-cultural norms, and institutional barriers. The lack of adequate support and

resources, including training and education, has also hindered women's ability to perform their duties effectively.

To ensure that the Panchayat Raj system continues to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, there is a need for sustained efforts to address these challenges. This can include measures such as providing greater support and resources for women leaders, promoting gender-sensitive policies and programs, and addressing patriarchal attitudes and behaviours at the community level.

Gram Panchayats are a quintessential Indian experiment towards democratic decentralisation. They are the first point for the introduction of civic and political processes for majority of the Indians. Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas have proved useful in disseminating government schemes and in identifying beneficiaries, etc. But there are some serious flaws in the functioning of the Gram Panchayats which we need to address in order to make them democratic institutions and not mere administrative set ups. When these grassroots institutions are becoming vexed with political malice along with money and muscle power, the inherent motives behind their foundations are threatened.

While the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution made some very necessary changes in the governance of these Gram Panchayats, there are still miles to go especially in relation to the Village Panchayats and the participation of women in effective governance. The inherent structure of the patriarchal family system and village society makes it difficult for women to truly participate and contribute in village governance. There is a wide gap between what the law enables, i.e., representation and what is the aim of that law, i.e., participation. It is unsettling to note that women empowerment through Gram Sabhas seems to be a distant dream in today's socio-political scenario of rural India.

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