

Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj System in Odisha

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Introduction

Women constitute nearly half of the country's population, for healthy political system and welfare of the people it is necessary that women must come forward and play an active role in political affairs of the country. The United Nations (2000) has noted that, there are three places where women have always been excluded: military, religion and politics...it is in politics where they have the least access. The United Nations (2000) has also further noted that the Nordic countries provide a model of integration of women into political decision-making and public life and women's active role in the process of democratization has in some cases induced significant political and legal changes in their favour. There is a lot of awakening, but in the political field, process of their sharing has been comparatively slower in our country. To enable them 73rd and 74th Amendment to the constitutions were passed. These amendments provided for reservation of one third seats of members and chairperson of rural and urban local bodies for women of all categories. Women have been deprived of their legitimate role in social, cultural and political affairs due to male superiority based on myth about their natural weakness, physical as well as mental. The male dominance and denial of political rights to women are not peculiar to Indian culture. This has been a universal phenomenon. After a great deal of efforts at national as well as international level, the existing scenario has been changed. There is a lot of awakening, but in the political field, process of their sharing has been comparatively slower in our country. To enable them 73rd and 74th Amendments to the constitution were passed. These amendments provided for reservation of one third seats of members and chairpersons of rural and urban local bodies for women of all categories. To understand the reality of the accountability of it, it is necessary to know about the political participation of women in the post-colonial period and after independence of India.

Role of Women in Panchayats:

Women, who constitute half of the population, could not be neglected for long. Their exclusion from mainstream of social and political life is bound to create hindrances in the development process, and prosperity of the nation is bound to be adversely affected. They must, therefore, have a fair representation in political and administrative structure at all levels, so as to ensure due power sharing. In the present conditions of the social set-up reservation for weaker sex was inevitable to push them through. Without

reservation the reluctant lot of women, who remained suppressed for centuries, cannot come out to have their share in power. The reservation alone can, however, not solve the problems. It may rather create its own problems. It is, therefore necessary to examine all aspects which affect participation of women in political process. For centuries, women have remained confined to four walls of the house, busy in household work and bringing up children. This is their first experience in politics. It is, therefore, not surprising that many of them could not realise the importance of these amendments. However, these provisions for reservation have certainly encouraged a section of women, who had some political awareness and aspiration. Today, they may be few in number but they have a vision and mission either of their own or because of sole political background of their family members. The need of the day is to inculcate a sense of responsibility in husbands to realize that by active participation they can help in empowering women or their wives. Women felt more helpless in executing their functions as they could not use money and muscle power as some male leaders do to get their work done. They could also not pursue matters in the capital with bureaucracy. If propriety and honesty work, the women representatives can wield real powers and develop their constituencies in a most effective manner. Unfortunately, this is a big "if" in present day political atmosphere particularly in rural sector. A few chairpersons of District Panchayats have already been suspended for charges of corruption. Through women representative in general are comparatively more honest than their male counterparts yet some of them do not lag behind in these matters and some are forced by their husbands to adopt corrupt means as every political today wants to accumulate wealth overnight as matter of greed as well as necessity on account of expensive election process. Law has its limits in eradicating social evils unless the attitude of individuals as well as society changes.

Political Role of Women in Post- Colonial India:

Hindu Dharma Shastras and customs had already paved the way for their complete subordination to male through deprivation of property rights, worship of husbands as God, dowry, and sati systems. The Mohammedan rule confined upper caste women to their homes and early marriages were preferred. The British rule contributed a lot for emancipation of women. Unless women were made aware of what was happening in the outside world, they could not believe that their emancipation was possible. By the turn of twenty-first century, aspirations of educated women and their leaders enlarged to cover political participation. By the time of the First World War the women movement began to be feminist throughout India. A demand for women's franchise was initiated in 1917 when a deputation of Indian women led by Sarojini Naidu presented a demand before the British Parliament for enfranchisement of women on the basis of equality with men. The Reforms Act of 1921 enfranchised a small section of the Indian

population including women. Women's right to vote was subject to qualifications of possession of "wifehood", property and education. A meeting of representative women's organizations drafted a memorandum demanding adult franchise without sex discrimination. The electoral rules had, however, been so framed that any Provincial Legislative Council could franchise them if they thought fit. Madras and Bombay took advantage of this rule and women were granted franchise before the end of the year 1921 and united provinces granted them franchise in 1923. Three years later central provinces, West Bengal and Punjab also followed. Thus, by 1929 all provincial legislatures had given them right to vote. In 1926 women were, for the first time, eligible for being members of the legislatures and in 1927 Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was nominated as the first woman member of Provincial Legislative Council of Madras and was chosen to be the Deputy President. There was no elected women member in Provincial Council or Assembly. Women had not yet been made eligible for membership of Council of States (the second chamber at the Centre). Mrs. Poonam Lakhose became Minister of State in Travancore Government. In 1931, the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress took the historic decision of committing itself to political equality of women, regardless of their status and qualifications. The Government of India Act of 1935 paved the way for women (above age 21) with property and education to exercise franchise deleting the condition of marriage. Besides legislature women also became members (elected or nominated) of local bodies such as municipalities, district and local boards. Thus, during British Rule country witnessed unprecedented awakening in women. They had several organizations on all-India basis. They were also active members of Congress, the main political party. Several women had excellent role in freedom struggle establishing beyond doubt that they were in no way inferior to men, if proper atmosphere was provided to them. So far as politics is concerned their participation in large scale started during freedom struggle. In "Salt Agitation" they outnumbered men. Freedom struggle also produced some great women leaders who are source of inspiration for the coming generations. They have been more successful politicians than their male counterparts. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Mridula Sarabhai, Durgabai Deshmukh, Padmaja Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, Vijay Laxmi Pandit, Sucheta Kripiani, Indira Gandhi all have proved that women do not lag behind even in politics.

Political Role of Women after Independence:

Finally, the Constitution of India, in 1950, pledged the nation to achieving a just society based on the principles of equality and dignity of the individual, and proclaimed the right to political and legal equality as fundamental rights of all Indians. The guarantee against discrimination in employment and office under the state opened the avenues to offices of power and dignity. After enactment of the constitution and its enforcement the first step rural upliftment was the emphasis on community development projects in 1952.

The results have not been seen so encouraging as they ought to be. To a great extent this was so because no efforts were made to secure sufficient participation of women in a responsible manner. The institutions of local self-government were also not properly organized and they suffered from certain drawbacks including absence of women's effective participation. During Janta Party regime a committee was constituted at national level under the chairmanship of Ashoka Mehta in December 1977. The committee suggested that as a large segment contributing for successful operation of a democratic system, special attention should be paid to the role of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. In September 1991, Congress government under the leadership of late P.V. Narasimha Rao introduced two separate Bills-Seventy-second Amendment Bill for Panchayats and Seventy-third Amendment Bill for Municipalities. They were referred to Joint Select Committee of Parliament and were ultimately passed as Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendment Bills in December, 1992. The president gave his assent on April 24, 1993 as Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1993 for Panchayats and on June 1, 1993 the Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992 for urban local bodies. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution have been historic, characterised as a "silent revolution" in the national history. The significance of these amendments is to be seen not merely in decentralised power sharing but in the cession of power to women, assigning space for not less than one-third of the membership in the Panchayats and their presidencies for women and in proportion to their population for the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. Holding of periodic elections to the local bodies has been made mandatory as well so that there is democratic renewal of reservations from time to time. These amendments have also provided for reservation of offices of chairpersons to ensure their effective role in decision making process. 73rd and 74th Amendments were made in the Constitution in the light of women's role in freedom struggle and observations of our veteran leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Jaiprakash Narain and Indra Gandhi who tested them before and after obtaining independence.

Panchayatiraj in Odisha: An Overview:

Odisha became a separate province in 1936. It is one of the few States in the post-independent period to take up the Panchayatiraj as its main fulcrum of rural administration. The significant step in the decentralization process came after independence in 1948 when the Gram Panchayat Act was enacted. During the Chief Ministership of Nabakrushna Choudhury, a further attempt was made through constitution of Anchal Sasan and creation of Anchal Fund under the Orissa Estate Abolition Act of 1951. The Anchal Sasan Act (1955) was intended to accord full power to Anchal, a local authority which was at the higher level than the Gram Panchayat. It was designed to be a body corporate having fund rising out of land revenue, fees, tolls, cesses and taxes. Besides, Education Fund was made to finance educational

programmes of the Sasan. The officers of the institution were to be paid out of the Anchal fund. But, the Anchal Sasan Act was not implemented which prevented Odisha pioneering role in the democratic decentralization process much earlier to the Balwantraji Mehta Committee Report. The fate of Gram Panchayat during 1950s and early 1960s was under the mercy of several departments like Board of Revenue Department, Department of Agriculture and Community Development and then moved to the Political and Services Department. In December 1959, it was placed under the Department of Planning and Coordination with a Secretary to head the Department. The B.R. Mehta recommendations were given effect in the year 1961 and the three-tier system of PRIs was introduced in Odisha. Both Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Acts were enacted. In July 1962, a new Department of Community Development and Panchayatiraj was created. The Panchayats, Samiti, Parishads and former District Broads came under its purview. Thus, the three-tier Panchayatiraj system introduced in Odisha took few years to get established. In 1967, Odisha came under Swatantra-Jana Congress coalition government. As a part of poll promise, the State Legislature abolished the Parishad in 1968 and a two-tier system was in operation. This enhanced the role and responsibility of the Panchayat Samities. After the abolition of Upper tier of PRS, the District Advisory Committee of which the Collector was the Member-Convener started functioning. A non-official member was elected to preside over DAC as and when it met. Besides the DAC, there was District Development Committee presided over by the Collector. Both these bodies were attended by the district officers. In Odisha, there were violation of the B.R. Mehta Study Team observations. However, the PR bodies in the State were criticized as inefficient and centre of nasty politics. They were replaced by the bureaucratic wings of the government, which suppressed the initiative of local people, in decision-making process on implementation of developmental programmes in rural areas. The elections to the Panchayatiraj bodies became irregular. Odisha, who introduced legislation on grass-root democratic bodies ahead of many states in India, could not retain its tempo. The Five Year Plan was dormant and there was visible stagnation. It remained relegated for two decades including the second generation PR bodies recommended by Ashok Mehta Committee. By 1990 the attempts had been made at the national level to form a grass-root body so that planning can operate from below. Ultimately, it was agreed that none other than the age-old Panchayat System with a new face and constitutional recognition can help twin objectives of equity and social justice to eradicate poverty and cause growth. The P.K. Thungon Committee recommended for such type of PR bodies. The Union Government under Rajiv Gandhi and V.P. Singh tried but ultimately P. V. Narasimha Rao's government which could initiate 72nd Constitutional Amendment Bill which became 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act with effect from 24th April 1993. But, in Odisha under Biju Patnaik acted ahead of the Central Government's initiative. 27 years ago when he was Chief Minister of Odisha, he could create a pro-active government for democratic

decentralization. He had also introduced the concept of Panchayat industry and award to Samiti for visible industrial development. His short tenure prevented Panchayat System to get his dynamic vision and wisdom being translated into action.

In the year 1991, three landmark legislations were enacted to facilitate devolution of power to the PR bodies to bring about rural development through people's participation and co-operation. The elections for PR bodies were held in 1992. A new social, revolution in rural Odisha ushered and one-third seats were reserved for women in all the tiers of PR bodies.

Women in Odisha PR System:

Biju Patnaik, the most dynamic Chief Minister of Odisha was most emphatic about participation of women in the Panchayatiraj System. He announced that for the first time in the history of Independent India those women will be given 33 percent reservation in the three-tier Panchayat Raj Institutions. And true to his word, he saw to it that the Odisha Zilla Parishad Act of 1991 and the Gram Panchayat Samiti Amendment Act of 1992 were passed by the Odisha Assembly that provided for 33 percent of reservation for women including Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women. For the first time more than 25 thousand women were elected to various Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samities and Zilla Parishads. It was further provided that one-third of Zilla Parishads would have exclusively women Chairpersons. In the case of the Panchayat Samities and the Gram Panchayats, one of the two office-bearers, i.e., Chairpersons or Vice-Chairpersons must be women. Chief Minister Biju Patnaik also emphasized that all the elected representatives of the PRIs should receive adequate political and administrative training. It must be pointed out that Odisha Government's policies on reservation of women were followed by many other state governments in India that culminated in the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts to the Constitution. It also adds to the credit of Mr. Patnaik that after a lapse of eight years, it conducted elections to Gram Panchayats in the year 1992 for 5264 Gram Panchayats in the state. When the devolution of powers envisaged in the 73rd Amendment Act and the women empowerment scheme implemented, these were already incorporated in the vision of the then Chief Minister of Odisha Biju Patnaik. In Odisha, the 73rd Amendment Act and its important provisions were incorporated through confirmatory legislation and fresh elections were held in 1997. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution has conferred constitutional status to PRIs. Over the past five decades, PRIs have emerged as the powerful institutions in bringing about rapid and sustainable development and socio-economic transformation in rural Odisha. Over viewing some of the empirical works on empowerment of women in Panchayatiraj System in Odisha, specially works of Snehalata Panda (1996,1999), Bidyut Mohanty (2002), Dayanidhi Parida (2010), it is revealed that:

- The women who reluctantly entered into politics showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and increasing perception of their role and responsibility.
- Due to strong caste feelings women belonging to upper caste have not come forward to represent the Panchayat which provided an opportunity to the women from the labour and lower caste to emerge as a potential force in village politics.
- About 80-90 percent of women attend the Panchayat meetings regularly. Given the sure number, one might conclude that the democracy has become participatory than before at least at the grass root level.
- The socio-economic background of these women showed that majority of them came from the lower income group particularly at the village Panchayat level.
- The working culture of the Panchayat has changed because of the presence of the women.
- A part of the increase of the female literacy rate can be attributed to the presence of the women in Panchayat and their willingness to get educated.
- The standard of political institution at the grass root level has not been lower because of women reservation.
- Women are not only working for women's development but also really putting their interest in general matters and getting success also, So, the concept that women cannot lead in developmental process is found wrong.
- With great effort the women leaders did the development works and the files were maintained perfectly and the government institutions were followed with greatest care.
- The involvement of women leaders in different developmental works definitely increased their awareness and confidence in themselves.

The role of women leaders in developmental process is a mixture of some sort of harassing and meaningful. It is found that, due to illiteracy and poor socio-economic status, the women leaders could not assert influence on the decision-making process. Through reservation has made women able to participate in the electoral process of the local-self governance system in a large way. Women leadership has come under immense pressure due to the criminalizing Panchayat elections including harassment and murder. For instance, Dalimba Sahu was elected ward member uncontested in her village in Kalahandi district. But she faced an unimaginable pressure to cast her vote for the election of Naib Sarpanch. When Dalimba refused to buckle under pressure, she was kidnapped and kept captive for five days away from her family. Second instance, Anjana Dehury was a popular candidate

in her Gram Panchayat in Keonjhar district, when she stood for the post of Sarpanch in the Panchayat election of 2007, it was not acceptable by her husband that she should enter the election fray. The consequence was that Anjana was killed by her spouse. Due to social tradition of male superiority, women leaders are not getting any chances to defend their voice before elderly male persons. They are feeling shy while talking in a meeting. Women leadership faced tremendous pressure in their normal functioning as power-hungry male members did not accept them at par. The percentage of women at various levels of political activities increased dramatically, but it is found that women were still not able to exercise their power, in many cases they were just rubber stamps either in the hands of their family members or in the hands of their senior party members. However, the above instances do not mean that women leaders in Panchayatiraj System in Odisha became failed. In Odisha, women made the Panchayati different. The 73rd Amendment of 1993, providing reservation for women at grassroot levels, has gone long way in the empowerment of Indian women. While Odisha's women explain more about the social transformation and the difference it had made in rural Odisha. Some instances are there:

As Litali Das, a social activist works with women's issues, cites some instances.

1. In 2009, in Nuapada District of Odisha, some women panches in Boden Block wanted to convene a Gram Sabha. But the Block Development Officer was not convinced. The ladies then showed him the Odisha Panchayatiraj manual that stipulates the mandatory holding of Gram Sabha at least four times a year. The BDO capitulated.
2. In another instance, Sangeeta Nayak, Sarpanch of Borda Gram Panchayat in Kalahandi District mobilized around 3000 people to block the Collector's path. They got a doctor appointed in the village primary health centre that had not seen a doctor for years.
3. Similarly Nayana Patra, a lady ward officer in Baruan Gram Panchayat in Dhenkanal District has set an example in improving the educational system in her village (the school drop-out rate has since declined considerably) and in protesting local forests.
4. In Koraput District, when Smt. Aparajita Sarangi, the District Collector started a movement in the district called "Jagan Abhiyan" where the women took true leadership in empowering themselves along with others in the district, The women leaders from the villages were given a special power of police by administration. The illiterate women fruitfully led the campaign for total literacy and antiaddiction movement in the district.

The Odisha Nari Samaj (ONS), a state level federation of 55 block level tribal women's organization has made its presence felt during the last Panchayat elections, as 1,226 of its

nominees selected through ONS has not only succeeded electorally, it has also trained these women on the PR System and equipped them to make their Panchayat a model of development. Source of the ONS claimed that candidates picked by Nari Samaja had contested as independents. They have own 89 Sarpanch posts, 78 Samiti Sabhya post, and 1,065 ward member posts. Thread, the Odisha based training institutes which initiated these organizations 12 years ago had trained over 1100 tribal women intensively in three phases and exposed another 1500 men and women to a number of workshops on Panchayatiraj. The 55 block level tribal women's organizations selected these tribal women and some men for contesting 2007 Panchayat Elections, supported their social and development activities in the villages for last two years. Thus, the grass-root level tribal women's organizations also involved in the process of social development in their respective communities have now come out successful to be actively involved in the political process ensuring active participation in the decision-making through Panchayatiraj (Achievement News, March 21, 2007) .It is reported by the then State Election Commission Mr. Sanjiv Chandra Hota, that in the last Panchayatiraj elections(2007) in Odisha,32,100 ward members, and 101 Sarpanches have been elected uncontested which was a very good sign of communities reposing faith on community leadership without difference. Portraying the Gram Sabha as the 'heart' and Gram Panchayat as the 'brain' of the PRS, he said that "Gram Swarajya" can be realized through this PRIs and Odisha Nari Samaj. Tribal women organizations in the state are sufficiently prepared through various experimental training and political parties need to be kept out and this can be done if organizations and service minded outfits as well as individuals take position at the grass-root level.A nationwide study on Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) commissioned by Ministry of Panchayatiraj in 2007-08 had concluded that the earlier notions of women being mere proxies for male relative have gradually ceded space to the recognition that given the opportunity to participate in the political system, women are as capable as their male counterparts. EWRs have used their office not only to mainstream gender issues but also address the developmental needs of the community as a whole and also issues such as health, sanitation, early childhood care, drinking water etc. that have a special impact of the lives of women (Information given by the Minister PR Sri V.Kishore Chandra Deo in a written reply in the Rajya Sabha).In a bold move with far reaching impact on electoral politics at the grass-root, the Odisha Government has made 50 percent reservation for women in Panchayatiraj institution to achieve gender equality in the representation in Panchayairaj bodies. The state legislature unanimously gave its nod to the Odisha Panchayat Laws (Amendment) Bill 2011, by amending the Odisha Gram Panchayat Act, 1964, Odisha Panchayat Samiti Act and the Zilla Parishad Act enhancing

the quota for women from existing 33% to 50% in February 2011 in the three-tier Panchayat bodies (The Economics Times, 8.4.2011). By amending the Panchayat laws, the Bill also provided reservation of the seats and office of the Chairpersons for two terms as it was felt that the operation of single term did not attract more candidates. The experience of first term would be useful in the second term for the women to prove themselves as the true representative of women as well as the entire community. It was implemented in the PR elections in February-March 2012. This was being done in view of the efficiency, abilities and success shown by women in various spheres and in order to take forward and empower the women in decision-making process at local self government. However, those examples of women's empowerment in Odisha are very scanty. It requires a lot for their empowerment. The Odisha PR Department and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of women (UN Women) have signed an agreement for promoting women's political leadership and empowering the elected representatives in the local government. At present the programme is being implemented in six states, i.e. Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan. The main objectives of the programme are capacity building of the elected women representatives at the Gram Sabha level, research and policy advocacy to address the legal and political issues pertaining to local-self governance and evolution of a centre of excellence.

Suggestions

It has been observed that in spite of all sorts of ills in the present system of power sharing with women after 73rd and 74th Amendment of the Constitution there is no cause to be disappointed. It is certainly a good beginning in the right direction but it needs constant vigil to introduce necessary reforms to eradicate evils, which have crept into the desirable system of political structure conceived by the framers of these amendments. Following suggestions are given to ensure awareness among women and their effective role in politics at grass-roots level:

1. The power sharing in the present complex society of computer age will remain a mockery without a minimum standard of education for women participants. Unless the representatives are uneducated they cannot comprehend the problems of their constituencies, nor can they have any valuable contribution in solving those problems, let alone the innovative skill. It is, therefore, minimum standard of education is necessary for women representatives.
2. It has already been seen that education qualification alone cannot serve the purpose, unless women come out of purdah to ensure that active participation and

end the proxy system which is prevalent now at various levels of Panchayats. The direction for members' presence in meetings and exclusion of husband/ relatives from meetings should be enforced with a heavy hand.

3. Besides illiteracy and purdah system economic dependence of women on their husbands or other members of their family is also an important factor responsible for their ineffective participation or no participation at all. It is, therefore, necessary to have a network of cottage industries for women in rural areas with quality control system and arrangement for sale of their product. Some industries based on agricultural produce should be developed in each Panchayat.
4. All Gram Panchayats must be provided with telephone facility, a television and a small library to entertain and enlighten the members, as well as residents of the village. Women, who remain confined, will know something of outside world.
5. A comprehensive training programme should be organized for women members of Panchayats to acquaint the members with various development schemes operating in their jurisdiction and to discuss difficulties faced in implementing them. Attendance at training camps must be made compulsory and all women members must be required to speak from the platform. This will help in eradicating evils of purdah system and women will be more effective participants.
6. For effective participation of women representatives in Panchayats it is necessary to change the outlook of their husbands. Husbands must realize that when women contribute in earnings of the family they should share some household work.
7. Women need some preferential treatment by officials. In the office of their respective local body or in government offices, where they go for pursuing their work, they should be treated separately and promptly so as to avoid necessary harassment and embarrassment. That will help in generating in them self-confidence in due course of time. The work done by women members at various levels of their participation should be assessed annually at state as well as national level and outstanding workers must be publicly rewarded at some function. This will generate a feeling of competition among them. They will come forward and participate more effectively if this suggestion is followed.
8. Domination of criminals and anti-social element is a real threat to the effective participation of women. It is, therefore, necessary to create an atmosphere favorable for their participation. A part from such legal reforms some code of

ethics should be developed to respect the women members so as to encourage them to come forward and make their valuable contribution to the development of the area they represent.

9. In rural sector, mostly laymen and women chairpersons of local bodies are illiterate or semi-illiterate, they should need legal advice by a lawyer appointed by the government in dealing with the development work.
10. Arbitrary decisions of the pradhans are to be checked and corruption at grass-root level should be dealt with heavy hand.
11. In a democratic set-up number plays an important role as a pressure group provided it is organized. An unorganized mass even if bigger in size will not be able to build up such power as an organized section of the people. It is, therefore, necessary to encourage women to be united to fight their problems themselves. Women's organizations have done commendable service to the nation with regard to environment protection whether it is "Chipko Movement" or "Narmada Bachao Movement" or "Narmada Bachao Movement" or "for ban it liquors"

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