

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATS

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Abstract: The 73rd CAA's provision of reservation for women in PRIs, as well as later increases in the quota by States, has resulted in an unprecedented influx of women into India's governance arena. This level of political empowerment for women is among the best in the world. Since the above-mentioned Act was enacted, a quarter-century has passed, and most states now have their fourth or fifth generation of Panchayats in place. Women's leadership in Panchayats, which had a rough start, is showing signs of becoming more established and recognised.

Half of the population is made up of women. The issue of women's political empowerment has gotten a lot of attention around the world. In 1952, the United Nations established the Convention on the Political Rights of Women. Four World Conferences on Women have been held by the United Nations. The fourth conference, held in Beijing in 1995, affirmed that women's equal involvement in decision-making is not merely a demand for simple fairness or democracy, but also an essential requirement for women's interests to be considered. It further stated that at least 30% of decision-making roles should be held by women.

Introduction: Women's participation in politics and public life in India, on the other hand, has remained abysmally low. Beyond voting, there is a significant disparity between men and women in political activities. In compared to their participation at the lower levels of governance, women's participation at the higher levels is lower.

Women's leadership and management abilities are secretly recognised in the domestic sphere, but they are denied space in the public sphere. While other oppressed groups such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were given reservations in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies, women were not given any reservations under the Indian Constitution at the outset, limiting their political empowerment.

Article 15 (3) of the Indian Constitution gives the state the authority to create specific provisions for women. This constitutional requirement recognises the necessity for women in India to be socially and economically empowered in order to fully participate in the country's social, economic, and political activities. However, in order to maximise women's potential and empower them, the 73rd Amendment Act 1992 (73rd CAA) introduced for the first time one-third reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), ushering in a new era of women's participation in Indian local governance. Women's political empowerment in Panchayats, on the other hand, has been a gradual process.

The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report (1959) only recommended that the Panchayat Samiti's 20 members co-opt or propose two women who were interested in working with women and children.

The Ashok Mehta Committee Report (1978) proposed a two-tier panchayat system, in which the two women who received the most votes in the panchayat elections would be co-opted into the panchayat, even if they did not win. Any two women who are known to be active community workers could be co-opted if no women ran for office. Women should be given 30% of these bodies, according to the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988).

Meanwhile, several states had already begun to give women with reservations. Karnataka implemented a 25% reservation for women in Mandal Praja Parishads in 1985, with a further 25% reservation for women from SCs and STs. In 1986, Andhra Pradesh also established a 22-25 percent reservation for the Gram

Panchayat (GP), with two women co-opted into the Panchayat Samitis in addition to the elected women members.

According to Article 243D of the Indian Constitution, which was enacted by the 73rd CAA, one-third of the total number of seats and posts of the Chairpersons in PRIs at each level will be reserved for women, who will be assigned to different constituencies in a Panchayat by rotation. Reservations for seats and offices are made in this manner.

In all three tiers of PRIs, such reservations of seats and chairpersons for women are included in the reservations for SCs and STs. That means SCs and STs will have at least one-third of all seats and offices. Despite the fact that the 73rd CAA only provides for a third reservation for women in PRIs, 19 states (Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana) have increased the reservation of seats and offices of chairpersons to women to 50%.

Efforts are being made across India to enhance the reservation percentage from 1/3 to 1/2. In PRIs, there are roughly 13.45 lakh Elected Women Representatives (EWRs), accounting for 46.14 percent of all Elected Representatives (ERs). The details for each state may be found on the Ministry of Panchayati Raj's website (<http://www.panchayat.gov.in/women-representation-inpris>).

Women's Achievements in PRIs: Potential and achievements of elected women in PRIs were first overlooked due to sexism and the perceived threat of male dominance of the political system. They were dismissed as proxies for their husbands and other male family members, as well as proxies for village elites at times. Their ability to comprehend the governance process and lead panchayat matters was questioned. Many female political officials, on the other hand, have made a beneficial impact in their communities.

For example, under the MGNREGA, a woman Sarpanch of Chandsamand GP in Haryana's Karnal district constructed a three-pond system to purify grey water and then use it for gardening, kitchen gardening, and irrigation. A green belt has been established around the pond for the purpose of aesthetics.

Dhauj, another Haryana GP led by a woman, has taken a number of steps to empower women. Women's and girls' skill development, bridging the digital divide through mobile computer training institutes, encouraging and orienting schoolgirls on their rights, and campaigns against the Purdha/Ghungat (veil) system are just a few examples.

An MBA graduate who left a professional position with one of the country's largest telecom corporations to become the sarpanch of Soda GP in Rajasthan has been working since then to guarantee that the village has clean water, solar power, paved roads, toilets, and a bank. The woman Sarpanch of Dhani Miyan Khan GP in Haryana established a women's training centre and ensured that every village child attended school. Her village received numerous honours under her leadership for its exceptional hygienic standards, zero dropout rate, and the best sex ratio among all Haryana villages.

Sarpanch Dhunkapara GP in Odisha, a former investment banker, undertook a drive to revive traditional folk art in her community and ensured that the benefits of different government initiatives reached the underprivileged and worthy. She has educated her town on the benefits of the Public Distribution System, which most people were unaware of. Wheat, kerosene, and other commodities are now available at reduced costs. She also initiated a huge literacy programme for women in the panchayat, where only signatures, not thumb imprints, would be recorded for official applications.

Her efforts were recognised globally when she was chosen to talk on the significance of government transparency and accountability as part of the US Consulate's International Visitors Leadership Program.

After returning from the United States, the woman Sarpanch of Abdullah Badkheda is currently aiming to make her GP a model GP by assuring the most effective implementation of government programmes. Khetri GP in Assam has achieved 100 percent institutional delivery, 100 percent immunisation, near 100 percent drinking water coverage, sanitation coverage, and 80 percent all-weather road connection under the leadership of its woman Sarpanch. Aside from that, it hosts regular health clinics, legal literacy workshops for women, and shelters for victims of domestic violence and homeless women.

In her Namkhana GP in West Bengal, a woman Gram Pradhan has ensured that effective standing committees on women and children have been established. She has placed a strong emphasis on SHG formation, fun learning, and providing nutritious food for the youngsters. Her GP keeps track of the names and contact information of women who leave the country in search of work.

"It is apparent that women's leadership in panchayats is altering India," Pattanaik (2010) concluded after studying the operation of EWRs in a number of panchayats. These newly elected women, who are now role models for other women in their communities, are reshaping the development agenda to address issues that are crucial to village life. The number of success tales is in the millions.

Roads are being rebuilt, electricity is being provided to their villages, schools are being built, latrines are being installed, medical services are being made available, water sources are being made safe, local savings organisations are being formed, and the list goes on." In a 2017 survey conducted in six districts of Tamil Nadu, it was discovered that 60% of women elected as PRI representatives work independently of their male family members or coworkers. All that the PRIs' elected women MPs have accomplished does not indicate that all obstacles have been overcome.

Challenges Ahead of EWRs: EWRs continue to confront numerous obstacles.

Among the most pressing issues are:

(i) Patriarchy: Patriarchy still exists in Indian society, with the exception of a few tribal groups in the north-east. Many EWRs continue to serve as rubber stamps for their relatives and, on occasion, as proxies for rural elites. Their male coworkers are insensitive and unwilling to collaborate. Household obligations, the purdah (veil) system, and domestic violence all have a negative impact on their ability to cooperate.

(ii) Caste System: In rural India, the hierarchical caste system makes it difficult for SC and ST women to act independently and successfully. Community or Khap panchayats are similar to panchayats in that they pressurise EWRs to act in a certain way.

(iii) Lack of Cooperation from Line/Sectoral Departments: EWRs, especially first-timers, find dealing with officials from block/district administration and line/sectoral departments extremely challenging. Apathy and corruption in the bureaucracy are pervasive, leaving these EWRs demotivated and unhappy with the panchayati raj. People's expectations of delivery, along with administration's lack of collaboration, frustrate these EWRs to the point where they are often unwilling to run for re-election.

(iv) Inadequate Capabilities: The majority of EWRs are new to public life and lack the necessary knowledge and skills to manage panchayat affairs. Training programmes conducted by government were unable to meet the needs of all elected officials in a timely manner. During their whole time, a huge majority of ward members do not have the opportunity to attend any training. Their family members may also refuse to allow them to go and stay alone during the residential trainings. EWRs are also hampered by a lack of education. Educational qualifications imposed by a few states, such as Rajasthan and Haryana, have brought educated women and girls to Panchayats who are learning quickly and can operate successfully.

(v) Rotation of Terms: The policy of only reserving seats for one term and rotating reserved seats and chairpersonships also makes it difficult for EWRs to develop leadership qualities because it takes time for them to learn how to handle and negotiate various conflicting interests within the panchayat. Their term is finished by the time they gain these skills and begin to perform effectively. Dereservation of seats and offices of chairpersons, according to EWRs, is the main cause for their failure to get elected to PRIs.

Only five states, namely Chattisgarh, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, and Karnataka, have made provisions for two-term seat and chairman reservation so far.

(vi) Encroachment and Non-Payment of Taxes/Fees: If elected representatives, especially EWRs, try to remove encroachment from panchayat land/properties, they meet opposition from the community. They are frequently subjected to violence by strong members of society. Many rural households refuse to pay taxes and fees on time, despite the fact that they expect panchayats to provide timely public services and goods. EWRs' insistence is sometimes met with violent protests.

(vii) Two-Child Norm: The two-child criterion for panchayat elections is still in place in a few states. Women in rural areas have little control in the number of children in their families, and such rules restrict female participation in panchayats.

(viii) Inadequate Women Panchayat Functionaries: EWRs prefer female panchayat functionaries. Women, on the other hand, make up a small percentage of panchayat officials. EWRs find it difficult to freely connect with male functionaries when it is required due to patriarchal views. The Government of India, in collaboration with state governments, has launched a number of measures to assist EWRs in overcoming these obstacles and contributing successfully to positive development in rural regions.

Conclusion: To summarise, the 73rd CAA's reservation for women in PRIs and subsequent increases in the quota by States have resulted in an unusually large number of women in India's governance arena. This level of political empowerment for women is among the best in the world. Since the above-mentioned Act was enacted, a quarter-century has passed, and most states now have their fourth or fifth generation of Panchayats in situ. Women's leadership in Panchayats, which had a rough start, is showing signs of becoming more established and recognised.

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