Participation of Women in Gram Panchayats: A Review of Literature

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This paper is a shortened version of a chapter of an unpublished study of the Department of Women’s Studies, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, titled ‘Empowerment of Women in Panchayat Raj: A Study of Panchayat Representatives in Bundelkhand Region of Uttar Pradesh’. An attempt is made here to review the available literature on participation of elected women representatives in Gram Panchayats. Only the relevant contributions are briefly presented.

Introduction

In the aftermath of successive elections to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in various States of the country, several studies have appeared, evaluating the experiment of women’s representation and participation in panchayats. These comprise both theoretical and empirical analysis of participation in terms of role of elected women members in panchayats, their social and economic characteristics, why do women contest, women’s awareness of Panchayati Raj, modes of participation, surrogate representation, gender exclusion, and a host of other issues and challenges, both positive and negative in PRIs.

One group of studies shows that PRIs headed by women, has not only made an impact on grass-root governance, it has also shattered many of the supposed myths such as inability to handle power and responsibility outside their homes. There is a visible improvement in the administration and delivery of services at Gram Panchayat (GP) level mainly, or of greater focus on the felt needs of the people, greater transparency, greater reliance on horizontal linkages and greater participation of people particularly women members of the village community.

Another group of studies argues how gender exclusion, effected in a variety of ways, and caste factor hinder effective participation of women in Gram Panchayats. Gender exclusion manifests itself in the patriarchal ordering of society which includes commonly observed phenomena of tokenism and surrogate representation. Caste is also a form of social constraint, insofar as it mandates seclusion or places women belonging to lower caste or scheduled caste groups at the twin mercies of patriarchy and caste position.

There is still another group of studies which provide very interesting insights into the modes and quality of participation of EWRs in Panchayats. While seeking to extrapolate commonalities and variations relating to the participation of women in PRIs across different States, the findings of these studies are summarized below.

Elected women representatives as change agents

Elected women representatives are usually young women of 25-45 years of age (Devaki Jain, 1996). Women’s experience of PRIs had transformed many of them and this included empowerment, self confidence, political awareness and affirmation of information. Women’s empowerment had also challenged traditional ideas of male authority and supremacy.

In Orissa, women were found to have entered into politics due to mandatory provision of reservation (Snehalata Panda, 1997). Most of the women were from non-political background and entered into politics due to persuasion by their family members or pressure from the village community. Women who reluctantly entered into politics showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and increasing perception of their role and responsibility.

Another research write-up brought out that prevailing caste feelings and women belonging to upper caste aspects of welfare schemes, and the financial powers of panchayat bodies.

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have not come forward to representing the panchayat (Snehalata Panda, 1999). This has provided an opportunity to the women from labour and lower caste to emerge as a potential force in village politics. It also observed that the most of the women entered the Panchayat Raj Institution due to persuasion by their family members and pressure from the village community, pressure from political party and their personal interests.

Evaluating the views and attitudes of male representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in relation to the issue of women’s reservation and empowerment, a study conducted in the state of Himachal Pradesh found that the large majority of male representatives believed that the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj (HPPR) Act, 1994, had provided a platform for women to express their views and participate actively in local governance, and that this had also enhanced the self-esteem and social prestige of women by enabling them to take up leadership roles in local bodies (Charanjeev Singh, R.K. Sharma and Puja Sharma, 2007). The responses of male representatives in respect to the performance of women colleagues strongly indicated that women representatives had proved themselves as leaders, acting independently in matters relating to PRIs.

Elected women members in Haryana were handling various problems of the village like water supply, pension, education and vocational training etc (Pamela Singla, 2007). Further, the men members seemed to be addressing construction related aspects more such as sewer related problem or construction of a building in comparison to the women members. This is indicative of the profile of the issues addressed by elected women members. Some of the inherent structural constraints which inhibited women’s participation in the PRI were such as being related to men in the village which prevented their speaking in Gram Panchayat or the very formal atmosphere in the Zilla Parishad meetings. Some of these inhibitions seemed to have diminished with passage of time.

The earlier notions of women being mere proxies for male relatives 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 (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GOI, 2008). The positive impact of entering politics and working as a Panchayati Raj functionary was evident from the fact that a sizeable proportion of women representatives perceived enhancement in their self-esteem (79%), confidence (81%) and decision-making ability (74%). The performance index, computed by using a range of questions related to the role of elected representatives, showed a longer duration of being an elected representative, training, education upto middle school and above all, active engagement in panchayat work as important determinants of good performance.

A study on factors affecting performance level of women panchayat members of Panchayati Raj system in Sikar district of Rajasthan found that age, education, family type, mass media exposure, social participation and urban contact all have significant associations with the performance of women panchayat members (Poonam Kalash, Rajendra Rathore and Manoj Kumar, 2009). However, caste and income have no significant association with performance levels of women panchayat members.

Women’s presence in large numbers in grassroots political institutions has also offered them opportunity for networking and organisation (Hiranmayee Mishra, 2010). This resulted in creation of a sense of psychological empowerment in them, which is also very important for the long-standing goal of political empowerment. While empowerment is a long-term process and it is not as simple as to say that these women are amply empowered now, it is noteworthy to mention that the paths these women have chosen and the choices that they have exercised through their capacity to negotiate in public, while keeping the private world intact, is certainly commendable.

The participation of elected women representatives in panchayats has also been evaluated by their formal engagement with panchayat processes, such as attending and taking part in meetings. A Study of Jorhat Zilla Parishad found that majority of the women members took their responsibility seriously as they regularly participated in meetings (Shivani Phukan, 2010). Some of the women members had gained confidence and experiences in addressing group of people both in formal and informal atmosphere. They were proud of their new position and saw it as an acknowledgement of their capability. They also wanted to take part at the high levels of decision making and wanted to gain more knowledge and experience because they felt that by occupying political position they were getting prestige, power, popularity, identity and the opportunity to serve the people.
Reservation of women in Gram Panchayats has created a space for women’s needs within the structural framework of politics and legitimised women’s issues (Suvarna Ashok Benke, 2011). The new set of women representatives who reluctantly entered into politics showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and increasing perception of their role & responsibility.

Effective participation of EWRs in gram panchayats still a far cry?

There is another group of studies which have shown that effective participation of elected women members is still a distant dream. The majority of the women Pradhans in Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh were found illiterate and only able to put their signatures on official papers (Sudha Pai, 1998). They were almost insignificant in the functioning of Gram and Block Panchayat bodies. As they belonged to better off families in the villages, they did not work outside their homes. They agreed to stand for elections due to family pressure and also the decision of their community and not because they were keen to do so. The reservations provided by the Government had forced them to contest elections; provision of reservation has not led them to participate in decision-making in local bodies.

It was also reported that at the grass root level only beginning had been made and wholesome acceptance of women in every facet of life is still to come. Around 28% of the total women members took refutation of their points in the meetings without any form of protest or any pressure to take note of their views (Amal Mandal, 2003).

The awareness level of elected women members of their roles and responsibilities have been quite low (Department of Women and Child Development, GOI, 2004). Only twenty percent of the respondent elected women members had high level of awareness, the majority had minimum awareness only. Besides, the participation level of the respondent elected women members in Panchayat meetings was also quite low – only 21 percent respondents participated fully and a considerable number did not participate at all. Women members could not play their role due to various social, economic and psychological problems. Usually, they were consulted only after male members of the Panchayat had taken the decision. The role played by women members in the general development of their respective villages was mainly in the field of education, sanitation, etc.

Another study on empowerment of elected SC members in Bihar found that one of the reasons for low attendance of villagers in Gram Sabha meetings was the absence or poor understanding among the elected members (Planning Commission, GOI, 2006). Because of this, members failed to convince the villagers about the importance of their participation in the Gram Sabha meetings. Consequently, the Gram Sabha remained an ineffective institution and the Mukhia and the influential persons acted arbitrarily. The officials admitted that the Mukhia dominated over the Panchayat and kept Dalit elected members in dark about the different schemes to be implemented in the panchayat.

S.N. Ambedkar (2006) highlighted that almost 50% of the women Panchayat leaders belonged to one or the other political party. Only few mentioned that they had no particular political affiliation and contested as independent candidate. Many of the respondents contested elections for non-availability of women representative in Panchayat. He also reported that women leaders mentioned the officials as corrupt men.

In Punjab, the majority of the women panchayat members (51.7%) never participated even in case of invitation, largely due to pre-occupation in domestic chores and social obstacles (Sukhdev Singh and Verminder Kaur, 2007). They confessed that they had only to sign on the resolution register brought usually by the village sarpanch. About half of them did not give any time at all towards the panchayat work.

According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj study (2008), however, the overall quality of participation across various dimensions was reasonably good. A sizeable 93 percent of male Pradhans reported performing their primary role of organising and attending the Gram Sabha meetings. Though in smaller numbers than male Pradhans, a significantly large proportion of female Pradhans (86%) also reported executing this important role of being a local Panchayati Raj functionary. However, the participation of women citizens of the village was reported to be quite low (less than 25%) which pointed to the need for better community mobilisation by elected representatives.

Most women in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh were only figurative members of the Panchayat, with actual responsibilities being shouldered by male family members (Centre for Social Research, 2009). The awareness level of all Panchayat members is very poor regarding the importance of women’s reservation in
Panchayat Raj Institutions, as well as regarding laws pertaining to women, financial aspects of the Panchayat and issues to be addressed by PRI. Most women expressed the need for capacity building in terms of better education and focused training on Panchayat functioning.

Elected women members have been reluctant to participate in the meetings due to their lack of communication and public speaking skills (Bal Vikas Social Service Society, 2009). This has been a deterrent in their participation in decision making in the local bodies, despite the provision of reservation. The training programs organized by the government are not adequate to enhance their capacities and innovative skills.

However, there was no significant association of caste and income with the performance levels of women panchayat members in Sikar district of Rajasthan (Poonam Kalash, Rajendra Rathore and Manoj Kumar, 2009). Only age, education, family type, mass media exposure, social participation and urban contact all had significant associations with the performance of women panchayat members. While for caste and income, the calculated chi square value (1.25) was found to be lower than the tabulated value; for social participation, the calculated chi square value (9.52) was much higher than the calculated value at 1% significance level. (Poonam Kalash et al, 2009)

**Gender and caste exclusion in gram panchayats**

Gender and caste are key factors in determining people's inclusion in gram panchayat activities. According to a study conducted in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, women participate significantly less than men (Ruth J. Alsop, Anirudh Krishna and Disa Sjoblom, 2000). The operation of social factors, which limit women's involvement in public affairs, is also reflected in the generally low levels of education and information that prevail among women. Correlation coefficients between gender and education and gender and information were both of the order of minus 0.42, indicating that women are, on average, considerably less educated and they consult fewer sources of information than men.

K. Kumtakar's study (1998) revealed that a majority of women leaders said their husbands discouraged them from attending the meetings or hindered their activities. In most cases, it is the husband who made the decisions for Panchayat and the wives put their signature or thumb impressions on the official documents.

The women who are elected are not always treated with due respect, and neither the reservation for women nor their actual presence in the Panchayat has become any more sensitive to the problems related to the village women in Jammu & Kashmir (Shashi Kaul and Shradha Sahni, 2009). Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously nor were they consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they are women. At times they were pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions made by the male dominated Panchayats.

Elected women members depend quite often on the male members and officials for advice and for clarifications (Shivani Phukan, 2010 and Suvarna Ashok Benke, 2011)). They are unable to understand the basic of working of Gram Panchayats. Lack of education or low level of education has become a major obstacle in the path of playing active role in the functioning of Panchayats. Economic dependence of the women members leads to the curtailing of their position in both family and political office. Since they don't have the required skills, leadership qualities, nor self confidence, majority of them can't achieve anything and remain mere ‘show pieces’ in the Panchayati Raj institutions (Bala Vikasa, 2009).

A study of Dalit women's right to political participation in rural Panchayati Raj in Gujarat and Tamil Nadu found that once elected, dominant caste male controlled over panchayat resources and ingrained discriminatory attitudes continued to govern to a large extent the experiences of Dalit women panchayat representatives (Jayshree Mangubhai, Aloysius Irudayam sj and Emma Sydenham, 2009). At least three-quarters of these women were either proxies or faced strong opposition and obstructions while attempting to work for the benefit of their community.

Political participation of elected Dalit women members suffers from tripartite discrimination based on caste, gender and patriarchy (B.B. Malik and Jaya Shrivastava, 2011). The other factors acting as a barrier are their poor socio-economic background and lack of education and information pertaining to the system. The provision of reserved seats in PRI’s has merely inducted Dalit women in the political process and raised their status without showing any desirable signs of their

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active participation in decision making. It is indeed disheartening to note that Dalit women have won their seats not because of any political consciousness but because of the vested interest of either their husbands or dominant castes of the village.

Engagement with panchayat processes and development issues

The participation of women’s representatives in Gram Panchayats have been studied mainly by examining the evidence of their awareness of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and their formal engagement with panchayat processes, such as attending and taking part in meetings. It was reported that they were not informed or invited to the meetings. While others were hesitant in participating in meetings in the presence of a large number of elder members. However, they had to forego their day’s wages or household duties just to identify beneficiaries as to convey what the gram Panchayat would do in future.

Elected women representatives have used their office not only to mainstream gender issues but also to address development needs of the community as a whole and also issues such as health, sanitation, early childhood care, drinking water, etc., that have a special bearing on the lives of women (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GOI, 2008, ibid). In Jorhat Zilla Parishad, however, the issues related to welfare of women did not receive enough attention at the meetings (Shivani Phukan, 2010). Women’s interests were not adequately represented because women members were themselves failing to take initiatives. This could be seen as a failure on the part of women members, though they did not see it as a failure. Majority of the women Members felt that there was no need to discuss women’s issue as a separate subject because it was included in the discussion on all round development programmes (Shivani Phukan, ibid).

A study on women’s participation in local politics in Rajasthan (UNNATI Organisation for Development Action, 2009) shows that only to a limited extent have women been able to use these spaces to influence development priorities and address issues that concern them at the local level. Although decentralisation has created scope for representation of hitherto excluded groups, reality indicates that it does not necessarily lead to their active participation. Several factors operate at different levels – individual, community and governance structures – which constrain the participation of women and other socially disadvantaged groups. Much of the discussion in the Gram Sabha focused on infrastructure issues, particularly on drinking water, construction of tanks and water pipelines. However, issues of public discrimination, domestic violence and atrocities were never discussed.

Panchayats function as platforms to address women’s practical gender needs rather than their strategic gender interests (ICRW-UN Women, 2012). According to male and female GP members, concerns related to infrastructure – water, sanitation, road construction and electricity – are the main issues discussed in GP meetings. Pension disbursement and issues related to wages and employment also emerge as common topics. These are also important priorities for GP members. However, not all issues deemed as priorities by the GP members are discussed in panchayat meetings.

The findings of yet another study (ICRW, 2012) on women’s participation in panchayats in Alwar (Rajasthan) and Mysore (Karnataka) have shown that nearly 35% women were interested in working for development while 50% said their family wanted them to contest indicating a need for familial approval to step in the political arena. Interestingly, 32% men said that families wanted them to contest. About 55% women and 32% men admitted that family members helped in panchayat work, again pointing towards dependence on family. Despite this handicap, women representatives appeared to be heading in the right direction. They raised issues like domestic violence, alcoholism and school attendance to a lesser extent in the panchayat. On the other hand, research shows that the success of panchayats in focusing on women’s strategic gender interests has been mixed (N.G. Jayal, 2006). There have been some positive outcomes for individual women and instances of women chairpersons and members taking on cases of alcoholism and violence against women (ICRW-UN Women, 2012, ibid). However, examples of panchayats being forums that systematically address and challenge the violation of women’s rights, gender inequities and different forms
of violence are few. There is a need then to better understand how PRIs can become more engaged and proactive around strategic gender issues and provide spaces to promote gender equity within an overall framework of gender responsive governance (ICRW-UN Women, 2012, *ibid*).

**Conclusion**

The present three-tier PRIs, with provision of representation for women provides a much-needed space for inclusive democracy. However, as it appears from the available literature, inclusion or representation of women by itself is not a solution; there is difference between formal power and effective power. There clearly exists a discrepancy between the formal and effective use of power of elected women. *Changing the gender composition of elected assemblies is largely an enabling condition but it cannot present itself as a guarantee* (Ann Philips, 1995). There are still formidable structural and political impediments to be overcome before women could actually have much of an impact on grass-root governance. Nevertheless, the various studies about participation of elected women representatives, some contradictory and other complementary; some triumphant, other tragic have enhanced the curiosity of researchers.

Most of these studies have adopted survey methods to evaluate the nature of women’s participation in panchayats. Nonetheless, empirical evidence is mostly ambiguous. The choice of methodology leads unavoidably to a focus on the subjective perceptions and attitudes of women representatives and, at best, those of some male colleagues, relatives and officials. Needles to say, there is need for a more diverse and nuanced view on both the obstacles and the possibilities for participation of elected women, especially in a context of low economic development.

There is a range of important aspects for further studies. It would be interesting to investigate as to what extent the discrepancy between formal and effective power of elected women is gender and caste related. One further step of research in this area could be to move from a focus on ‘perceptions’ of elected women to include real situations through participatory observations. An additional step of research could also be to study how the presence of women has affected the policy outcomes of these elected bodies.

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