



Women and Local Self Governance In An Indian Context

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Date of Submission: 15-11-2022

Date of Acceptance: 30-11-2022

INDIAN CONTEXT:

The ideology of division of labor forces women to be confined to the private sphere of life & restricts women's existence within domestic roles as wives & mothers. The male hegemony prevails in the decision-making processes both in private as well as public domains. Politics should be a democratic, participatory, accountable & transparent means to bring about a just, humane & equitable society. Political system should incorporate the interests of & be accessible to all sections of society, of which women constitute half of the population. High cost of electioneering, improper & illegal practices, violence & corruption are some reasons that prevent women from participating in politics. It is high time to seek & work towards transformation of politics that would establish a decisive role for women at all levels of governance & politics.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has constitutionalized the elected grassroots level local governing bodies i.e. Panchayats & Municipal Corporation as the third strata of the Government structure. These are self-governing institutions that stand for a decentralized, participatory, accountable, transparent, relevant polity administration. The Constitutional Acts have also set into motion a process that has made women's representation in local level decision-making a reality.

WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE:

A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Panchayat Raj, a system of self-governance, was introduced in 1959, following the submission of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report of 1957. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee had recommended that besides 20 members of the Panchayat Samiti (block level body), there should be two women as co-opted members. This may be said to be the first official declaration for women to enter active politics at the grassroots. Following this, the Maharashtra Zilha Parishad (district body)

& Panchayat Act of 1961, provided for nomination of one or two women to each of the three bodies, in case no women were elected. As it happened, out of a total of 320 women representatives of Panchayat Samities & Zilha Parishads in Maharashtra 1978, only 6 were elected members. In many parts of India, women were recruited to the Panchayat Raj by co-option rather than through election. The 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill was introduced in Parliament in 1989, which provided for 30% reservation for women. But it could not be passed. The Bill was defeated by a narrow margin in the Upper House. The Bill was reintroduced in September 1991, as the 72nd & 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bills with an additional provision such as one-third representation for women in chairperson positions. The Bills were finally passed on December 1992. Ratified by half the states by April 1993, they came into operation as 73rd & 74th amendments to the Constitution of India on 24th April 1993.

The provisions of the 73rd & 74th Amendment had far reaching consequences. It provided for direct elections to all the seats for the Panchayat – from the village level to the intermediary block committee (Panchayat Samiti) to the district level (Zilha Parishad) for a period of five years. The act is most significant for the reservation for women & Scheduled Caste (lower caste) & Scheduled Tribes.

This amendment can be considered as a landmark in the empowerment of women, as shortly after the 1992 election in Maharashtra, a total of 28,000 Panchayat Raj yielded positions of power to 93,333 women in various Panchayats as members & as chairpersons.

EXPERIENCE OF THE PANCHAYAT RAJ

The situation created by the Act was so drastic that it brought out women straight from the kitchen into the fray of politics & administration



with no training or experience whatsoever in public life. Women have been given power but they are not seen as political entities. They are seen as a source of status enhancement. Thus these elected women were mere fronts for their father or husbands or father-in-law or sons & very often did not attend the Gram Panchayat (village governing body) out of fear or ignorance. As a result, they are considered as proxy members or absentee members. New appellations such as “Sarpanch Pati” are used to describe husband chairpersons & members of Gram Panchayats, implying that they performed the Panchayat’s work on behalf of their wives. Elected women Sarpanch in many villages could not answer questions posed to them since their husbands would answer on their behalf.

Further, although the reservation of 33% of seats under the Panchayat Raj system has been a morale booster for women in rural India, their husbands & other men in the village were yet to reconcile themselves with the women’s new status. Women Sarpanchs who go out with men for work related to the Gram Panchayat or Zilha Parishad, are castigated as ‘bad women’ & they become victims of character assassination.

For e.g.

1) Ratnamala Vaidya faced the bad tactics of opposition party during the district level election. Since 1994 she is winning the elections of Gram Panchayat. She has done very good village development work. People appreciate her a lot.

2) Maya (a member of Vadval Gram Panchayat), along with a colleague from the village had gone to Latur to attend a program of women’s organization. The program was to be held in the hall of a hotel that had lodging- boarding facilities. The schoolteacher saw the women entering this lodge & that was it! He spread around vulgar rumors about the two women. “These women go to hotel rooms!” he publicized. All men of the village looked at the two with doubting & accusing eyes, the other women stopped talking to them. Organization’s work came to a stand still. However, women who have been active in the people’s struggles are able to work independently. A case in point was that of Kamalkar Hiram, a 25-year-old married tribal woman who catered to the need of seven villages & thirteen tribal colonies in an effort to implement water supply & road construction schemes.

Women in both states complained of the lack of information & experience, which made them diffident of their ability to handle the job, or

working in the system. They had no idea as to what constituted a meeting, what was an agenda, how meetings were to be conducted & what was expected of them as elected representatives. Women Sarpanchs are often marginalized. Men, who still turn to the previous male Panchayat members for guidance & advice, do not take their leadership in the village seriously. Added to this was the age-old tradition of deferring to the males for decision making & seeking their advice. Men expectedly, in many cases, were antagonistic to the women. In Kotgal Gram Panchayat of Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra, for the first time 11 candidates from lower caste won the elections in 2002.

Another example that one can sight is that of Ms. Sunita Agham. After being elected as the Sarpanch of Shirsgaon Pandhari village in Maharashtra she took charge of her office. On the day of first Gramsabha (public meeting in village which should be conducted once in month), Gram Panchayat Secretary was reading the information about the administrative procedures of the Panchayat. At this instance, the Ex-Sarpanch & his supporters got up & created a ruckus. They denied the appointments of Sarpanch & deputy Sarpanch & demanded to stop Gramsabha. Then after a big drama was created by Ex-Sarpanch & his men. They threw the chilly powder in Sarpanch’s eye, on the Secretary, deputy Sarpanch & the members of Gram Panchayat. Soon they started beating them & abusing Sarpanch as she came from a low caste. The elected women members often faced the un-cooperative, manipulative staff & officialdom.

The other example of harassment is a Women Sarpanch in Nagpur district of Maharashtra, who was being sexually harassed by Gram Panchayat Secretary. He used to write vulgar letters to her. One day after receiving the same type of letter she committed suicide.

Impact of Women Reservation:

Reservation policies clearly have a strong impact on women’s representation. Women participate more in the political process in Gram Panchayat in which seats are reserved for women. In that Gram Panchayat, there are significantly more investments in drinking water, road construction, health, public toilets etc. Women representatives devote more energy to women-specific issues than men do, and to are more successful in passing legislation on women’s issues when they propose them.



Women's experience of being involved with the PRI has transformed many of them. They have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, officials & most of all, by challenging men. They have become articulate & conscious of their power. Despite their low- literacy level, they have been able to tackle the political & bureaucratic system successfully. They have reported regular attendance at Panchayats meetings. They have used their elected authority to address, critical issues such as education, drinking water facilities, family planning facilities, hygiene & health, quality of healthcare & village development. They have also brought alcohol abuse & domestic violence onto the agendas of political campaigns. In these & other ways, the issues that women have chosen differ from conventional political platforms, which are usually caste/ethnic/religion based.

For decades, the Panchayats in Metikheda village in Yavatmal district of Maharashtra had done no work at all, till in 1998 the women took over & brought about a total transformation in the village. The women's Panchayat initiated & implemented water supply schemes, additional school rooms, provided fuel & sanitation facilities which reduced the burden of rural women drastically. All women Panchayat in Kultikri in West Bengal took up several income augmenting schemes such as waste land development, leasing of small ponds for aqua culture, organization of loan repayment, fairs, distribution of pattas, construction of roads & tube wells as utilized under the Employment Guarantee scheme. The most important achievement of the Panchayat has been the fulfillment of 100% literacy in its area. Forty teams of women in Sonabhadra (Uttar Pradesh) area carried out systematic campaigns covering ten villages each, to explain the salient features of the 73rd Amendment & the place given in to women. Women, who took part in these campaigns, were very clear about their cattle & for their families. They were equally determined to prevent the inflow of liquor into their area.

Women & men have different policy priorities. In developed countries, women are more likely to support liberal policies, a difference known as the "gender gap". The primary responsibilities of women in rural areas in India, besides working on the fields, are to fetch water, fuel & to take care of children. Child health has been shown to be more responsive to women's income than to men's income

ROLE OF MAHILA RAJSATTA ANDOLAN (MRA)

The Constitutional Amendment Acts have entitled over a million of women to become members & heads of political institutions. They need a supportive infrastructure that gives them political education & training. Mahila Rajsatta Andolan (Campaign for Women in Governance) works in this direction in state of Maharashtra. We are making elected women representatives conversant with the Panchayat laws, procedures, their rights, powers & functioning of the administrative mechanism through training programs & the use of posters, songs, street-theatres, stories, banners & other media. Mahila Rajsatta Andolan (MRA) is movement that has been working all over Maharashtra at both policy & program level with a firm stand of women's active participation in the process of village development. MRA is a campaign for Women in Governance initiated by Resource & Support Center for Development (RSCD), Mumbai in collaboration with its regional networks in Maharashtra in the year 2000, with specific strategies & campaigns:

'The magnitude of the problem like lack of people's governance is a multi political matrix. Only specific campaign with clearly defined focus, can create the sense of urgency, mobilize popular support, & marshal all possible resources to sustain mass action, continuity & follow-up of such issues.' To achieve these objectives, focus on 3 **major campaigns** related to the Panchayati System to bring about a social change:

- Empowerment of Gramsabha (village public meeting) & women's Gramsabha where women can actively participate in decisions concerning the village.
- Economic changes where community resources are available to all & its control by Gramsabha, & decentralization of finance from the State to the Panchayati bodies.
- Political decentralization from Panchayati to sub-committees whereby the political power is shared with a larger body of developmental actors.

Major Concepts Of Campaign

- Let village learn village governance
- Let's activate the village committees & their members.
- Let the villagers plan their budget

Campaign Strategies

- Information generation on various policies & resolutions through reliable sources.
- Dissemination of useful information through district centers.



- Field & policy analysis.

Achievements At The Field Level

- Publication of **Diwali (Indian Festival) Magazine as a medium to initiate dialogue between intellectuals & grassroots** of the society
- **Pre-session workshops** to address local issues
- **Struggle documentation** process to re-visit the vision of MRA
- **Gramsabha (Village Public Meeting) Gaurav Abhiyan.** Gramsabha is the platform provided by the Government to the people to keep a check on the village administration.
- **Show us Accounts Campaign** – this campaign was initiated to make people – both the elected representatives and common people aware of their rights to know about the village budgets, expenditures and related documents and hold the village administration responsible for the same.
- **Campaign on 10% reserved budget for women.** There is provision of 10% women & child welfare fund in the budgets of all the three levels of local self-governing bodies
- Series of **women leadership workshops.** In these workshops we give training related to women empowerment, Panchayat Raj System, Rights & duties of elected representatives, legal advice etc.
- **Pre-election Campaign.** By this campaign we guide people about their political rights, duties of citizens, qualities of right candidate etc.
- **Gram Panchayat Darshan (visit) campaign** by women leaders.
- **Felicitation of Husbands & Families** of women leaders, for supporting women to participate in village administration.
- **Joint Ownership of Houses** through Women Gramsabha
- **Grassroot Scholarship to identify grassroot issues.** MRA has undertaken reality studies in several villages to assess whether all the laws are being implemented well. In the process, we were also able to analyze the problems and obstacles that the Elected Women Representatives face.
- **Media Advocacy** through print media, Radio, T.V. & even folk media like street play & songs on legal provisions.
- **Daughters of Savitri** – a series for neo-representatives. A documentation of the life struggles of women who have entered politics at local levels.

- **Inter State Workshop** for national policy initiatives.
- **Dialogue with Maharashtra State Assembly Speaker & policy makers.**
- **MAVIM** (State Government's Board for women's economic development) – **MRA collaboration** for economic & political governance.
- **Huldi Kumkum** – **cultural campaign** to share ideas on governance with women.
- **Lobbying** with political parties, on specific issues.
- **Lokarpan Campaign** to initiate people's leadership in Organization at grassroot.
- **Novel on MRA process**, written by NGO leader.
- **Emerging front of forty women leaders.**
- **Creative participation in an election.** Many MRA Activists across the State contested elections. MRA extended full support to such potential women leaders.

Achievement At The Policy-Advocacy Level

- Demand for the **allocation of effective powers to the Gramsabha** accepted by the State Government & a law came into effect on December 2002.
- State Government has agreed to start **District level Consultation Centers** for Women in Panchayat Raj.
- **Women Gramsabha** now made mandatory before the general Gramsabha.
- State Government has accepted to make **suitable amendments** to resolve the issue of **suspended Gramsabha.**
- Block Development Officers are advised to give adequate publicity to Block meetings to ensure women's participation.
- **Three-fourth majority** is made Mandatory to unseat **women Sarpanch** through **No-Confidence motion**, thus putting a check on improper & gender biased use of statutory provisions.
- State Government has agreed to employ **Women Village Secretaries** on an experimental basis.
- **10% Budget** for women will be implemented rigorously.
- **Priority** to be given to **Women Groups for allocation of land** by the **Government.**
- Presently **financial powers** enjoyed by Water supply & Irrigation sub-committees is to be **extended to other committees** as well.



- As a result of MRA lobbying, State Government has issued a resolution stating that **women should be entitled to Flag hosting where she is heading the bodies** such as Gram Panchayats, Taluka Panchayat & Zilha Parishad.

Concerns And Challenges:

- NGO in village politics has emerged as a new trend. Villagers do not readily accept their increasing interference.
- **Exclusion of Elected Women Representative (EWR's) from selection process of the Sarpanch** by strategic actions like collective "Visit To Temples" Programs.
- **Physical attack on EWR's**, their families & supporters creates lot of insecurity among newly elected women members & their families.
- **Participation of EWR's in Gramsabha, Women Gramsabha, Gram Panchayat meetings is decided by Male members of the family.**
- Problems arising due to **Alcoholism hinder women's participation** in governance.
- **Character Assassination** of active women member is an often-used weapon by opponents.
- **EWR's are in dual mind – family role Vs governance role.**
- **Passive EWR's are Tolerable; Active EWR's are eligible only for no confidence motion.**
- Women have 33% reservations in the Panchayat Raj Institutions, but societal expectations are far beyond reality. EWR's are expected to become "**development magician**".
- Women are expected to execute **100% value based politics** within the existing self-centered, party focused and value-less context of governance.

WOMEN'S ISSUES ARE HUMAN ISSUES & WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS:

A few micro realities and Mayatai's insights on Governance for Human Rights.

In a democratic country, everybody has a 'Right to Express' his/her opinion. If we want to ensure success of democracy and well being of a just society, we have to encourage and elicit everybody's participation. Every person has unique skills. We should give each individual the scope to realize her/his potentials and utilize them for the betterment of our society. Especially women, she is mother of creation. She is capable of ensuring a healthy society. It is believed that if a woman is educated, the entire family reaps the benefit. Therefore participation of this indispensable

component of our society in political & decision-making process is must.

ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES SHOULD HAVE THE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND OTHER'S PLIGHT:

Due to lack of sensitivity, we are unaware of others' plight. We always tend to engage in self-pity. We feel that we are the most deprived individuals on this earth and that everybody else is better off. It is therefore essential to communicate with others. This is the only way to discover people who are facing extreme challenges and hardships in life...but are still at peace and enjoy every second of their existence. We should try to use our governing skills to ensure better conditions for such people.

FIGHT THE MENACE OF CASTE & RACE:

Several strong laws have been enforced till date to tackle the menace of caste, untouchability and race. However, we need purposeful and organized efforts to strike at their roots and uproot them. Women are still engulfed in the web of these inhuman practices. Often one's surname provides the key to one's caste status. Women should make conscious efforts to get rid of such biased notions and strike towards equality.

ALWAYS REMAIN DOWN TO EARTH:

Whenever we get power, we should utilize it for the creation of a just society. We should ensure the use of power for the betterment of the larger masses. While working for a good cause, one should forgo her/his vested interests.

NEED OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL POLITICAL EDUCATION:

In India, even today political illiteracy is extremely low. As a result, politicians and bureaucrats often exploit such citizens. Literate people too face such problems, as they are ill equipped to deal with such complex socio-political issues and exercise their rights. Therefore there is need of both formal and informal political education. Organizing mass training programs to enlighten people about the system and their fundamental rights - is the need of the hour.

50% RESERVATION FOR WOMEN:

In India, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment provides 33% reservation for women in the rural and urban Local Self Governing Bodies. However some practical difficulties have been



experienced at the filed level. For e.g. a particular Grampanchayat has 9-member body. According to 33% reservation for women, there will be 6 men and 3 women in this body.

MEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SAVITRI'S NATION:

In India, Savitribai Phule & her husband Jyotiba Phule are considered as the pioneers of "Women's Education". In 18th century, Jyotiba first educated his wife. Then Savitribai decided to use her knowledge for the others. She started teaching 7-8 girls in her village. Men from the high caste communities tried to obstruct her in several ways. Savitribai and Jyotiba were ostracized by their own family and were forced to leave their house. However, Savitribai did not step back and Jyotiba supported and encouraged her in all possible ways. Today we are in dire need of many such "Jyotibas" who will support their wives. With such backing, women and the nation are bound to progress at a greater pace.

GOVERNMENT & ADMINISTRATION:

People cannot identify with the Government's laws & administration. so it is our duty to create awareness, orient people towards government laws, GRs, schemes and make them realize that these laws are for their betterment. we need to bridge the gap between the people and the administration.

UNDERSTAND INTERNAL RELATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE SOCIETY:

While working in the field we come across different kinds of people. At times, due to personal disputes some people may try disrupt our work or even usurp resources for their vested self-interests. We need to assess the backing and support that we have. Our leadership is determined by the kind of people's support we have. We should try to transform our opponents into our supporters in peaceful and diplomatic manner.

PRIORITY NEEDS TO BE GIVEN TO PEOPLE'S INTEREST, RATHER THAN SELF-INTEREST:

One needs to realize that being the Village Head does not entitle one to usurp the benefits of all the schemes and fulfill vested interest. Such adverse mentality among leadership will prove to be disastrous. One should always think about the people first. Only then will our leadership get optimum acceptance from the larger society.

RAISE THE VOICE FOR A GLOBAL PLATFORM FOR WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE:

We should unite women from all over the world. For this we can use women's groups, Elected Women Representatives and SHGs (Self-Help Groups).