

Women's Representation in Local Governance

Mrs Debajyoti Bhuyan

Assistant Professor, Sissiborgaon College, Dibrugarh University, Assam

Abstract: The constitution of India is based on the principles of equality and guarantees equality before law and equal protection to all its citizens. It must only guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, but also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth. However, these rights have remained de jure and have not been translated into de facto rights. As such, women have been denied social, economic, civil and political rights in many spheres. An important area where women have been inadequately represented is in the political sphere Articles 325 and 326 of the constitution of India guarantee political equality, equal and right to vote respectively. Local self-Governance is an effective method of governing and is known as the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) under the control of the state government. In the rural areas three tier structures has been adopted.

India has adopted a bold affirmative action in providing for one third reservation for women in all institutions of local self-governance. It also provides for reservation of posts for chairperson and Deputy Chairpersons in the Panchayats and the committees in the Nagar Palikas. The reservation or quota system is put in practice by identifying one third of the total constituency as reserved for women.

Keywords: Women, reservation, panchayats, discrimination etc.



This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license

Introduction:

Women's representation in local governance is a crucial indicator of gender inclusivity. Since 1993, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has reserved one-third of seats in urban local bodies to women, multiple states have since granted 50 percent reservation of seats for women in urban and rural local self-government bodies. Today, women have become a crucial political constituency, both as voters and as electoral candidates. India is among the foremost countries for women's participation in local governments with over 1.45 million women shaping local decision-making. Women leaders are a critical link between local governance, sustainable development, and gender equality. However, across the country, their contributions to local governance remain undervalued. This paper assesses the evolution of women's representation in local self-governments in rural India, and identifies the milestones achieved and persisting challenges to propose policy recommendations to further enhance women's participation in local democratic governance structures.

In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. In fact, the status, employment and work performed by women in society are the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social economic or political progress of a country will be stagnated. The fact is that most of the women's domestic role is combined with economic activities and utilization of their skill and labour to earn extra income for the family, which makes the family to lead a decent life. Women are regarded as the "better half" of the society and at par with the men. Efforts are being made to realize that women are real "better half" in men's life. They share abundant responsibility and perform a wide spectrum of duties in running the family handling the house hold activities like rearing domestic animals and the like, and the most important role now women need to perform more responsibly is her active participation in politics. Political empowerment of women should be one of her prime priorities and the governments and the society must contribute steps in that way to make women participate in the political arena. For that, participation in local self-government provides initial steps as they are closer to the rural folk. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitution Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged section of society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. Panchayati Raj Institutions that work as grass-root units of decentralized democratic self-government have been considered as an instrument of socio-economic transformation in rural India. At the local level the 73rd constitutional amendment act of 1992 has made two important provisions for the improvement of women in decision-making and preparation of plan for development. This amendment has made a provision that at least one-third of women would be members and chair persons of panchayates involvement of people at the grass-roots level is the most important means of bringing about socio-economic development. Decentralization of power to the panchayati is seen as a means of empowering people and involving them in decision-making process. The democratic system in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, to achieve this objective, a system of democratic decentralization popularly known as Panchayati Raj has been introduced in India.

The Institution of Panchayati Raj is an important mechanism for decentralization of power and people's involvement in development activities. In India, local self-government as a system existed in varied forms but its spirit always remained as a part of our social-cultural ethos. During the medieval period the village bodies took the form of panchayats (an assembly of five people) which look after the affairs of the village. It was seen that the 'Gram Sabha' functioning through its executive committee, namely the Panchayat was able to govern and sustain a small community of people. Mahatma Gandhi envisaged the vision of "Gram Swaraj"- self sustained and self-sufficient village republics capable of managing their own affairs.

After independence, it was in 1959 that the panchayati raj system took its present shape. The turning point in the concept and practice of panchayati raj, however, ushered in with the appointment of the Ashok Mehta Committee in 1977. The committee recommended the implementation of three-tier system of panchayati raj system- gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti (Anchalik Samiti) at the block level and Zila Parishad at the district level.

Although local village level structures of self-rule have a long history, the idea of promoting local self-government, as enshrined in Article-40, was positioned within the non-enforceable Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian constitution without any explicit mention of women's representation. The Balwanta Rai Mehta Committee (1957) appointed to examine the working of India's Community Development Programme to address issues of decentralization, recommended that the 20 member panchayat samiti should co-opt or nominate two women with an "interest in work among women and children". The Maharashtra Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act of 1961 followed this suggestion, allowing for one or two women to be nominated to each of the

Panchayati Raj Institutions bodies if no women candidate was elected. In 1978, out of 320 women representatives on the panchayat samitis and Zilla parishads in Maharashtra, only six were elected. This demonstrated that the provision for co-option or nomination had a limited impact in accommodating women leaders in the panchayat system.

The committee for the status of women in India, in its report titled “Towards Equality” (1974), strongly highlighted that the concerns and viewpoints of rural women had not received adequate consideration in the government’s plans and development policies. It also proposed the establishment of statutory women’s panchayats at the local level but did not advocate for reservation. In 1978, the Committee on Panchayat Raj Institutions (Mehta Committee) recommended reserving two seats for women in each panchayat. The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) recommended that 30 percent of the executive-head positions from the village to the district levels should be reserved for women. The same recommendation was put forth in the unsuccessful 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill of 1989. Eventually, in 1993 Panchayate Raj was formally incorporated into the constitution through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (for panchayats) and the 74th Constitutional Amendment(for Municipalities) Act, with both providing for the reservation of one-third of elected seats for women. According to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, “Not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes or as the case may be the Scheduled Tribes”. It also provides that “Not less than one-third(Including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the SC and ST) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.

In modern day, the 73th amendment act, 1992 has given new lease of life to the institutions of panchayati raj. The institutional mechanism for effective governance at district and sub-district levels has not only been created but has also been strengthened both in concurrent and perspective manner. Empowerment of panchayati raj is crucial to the healthy functioning of democracy, to the success of development programmes, and the fulfillment of the dream of a just and equitable society. In this era of globalization and rapid economic growth, it is even more essential to ensure that the voices of the panchayats are heard, that panchayati raj leaders and workers have a say in shaping and influencing development policies so that grassroots needs and aspirations are represented, and the benefits of our economic growth flow equally to rural areas.

Participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institution:

In recognition to the importance of democratic institution at grassroot level, the panchayat (village council) at village level was established in 1961. The panchayati raj Institutions was in fact, considered to the most effective instruments for realizing the goals of economic betterment and social justice for the least privileged. Participation that constitutes nearly half of the population, in panchayati raj institution has been considered essential for enabling them to participate effectively and independently in democratic and political processes and to influence decision making. It has been recognized as a step towards equal society and a means of realizing for women the development goals.

The introduction of ‘Democratic Decentralization resulted in the establishment of panchayat. But in most of the panchayat raj legislation enacted by different state governments, women were to be co-opted under special category. This did not result into the development of village. In this connection the committee on the status of women in the panchayati raj institutions has not been effective either in articulating women’s needs or mobilizing women for adequate participation. The committee on panchayati raj institutions recommended (a) Increasing representation of women in these institution (b) establishing a special committee on women panchayat member and powers and funds to ensure that the decisions are made by women themselves on priorities and choice in welfare and development programs specifically for women and children (c) Provision of

institutional finance and budget support for rural industrialization project for women (d) Mahila Mondals to ensure full access to development, resources and services.

The world conference on Agrarian and Rural Development had also recommended that governments should promote collective action and organization by rural women to facilitate their participation in the full range of public services and to enhance their opportunities to participate in economic, political and social activities on an equal footing with men.

Thus it is obvious that local bodies at village level are required to play a meaningful role in promoting women's participation in development.

Uttar Pradesh being the largest state in terms of population in India has the maximum number of Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samities and Zila Parishad followed by Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. As per 1980s counts on an average number of population and village in India come to 2,098 and 2.8 respectively. These two averages were maximum in Kerala because of the densely populated state and average number of Gram Panchayats per panchayat samiti and panchayat samities per Zila Parishad in India were 47.4 and 17.8 respectively.

It is felt that mere reservation will not solve the problem unless women members are given commensurate powers to function effectively. The involvement of women in panchayati raj institutions specially at the lowest level has been increasing. The recent legislation of parliament on Panchayat raj ensures a 30% reservation of seats for women. There is no doubt that rural women have become more politically conscious than women in urban areas. There is a need to reserve certain seats for women also so that all political parties may be compelled to nominate women candidates to certain seats. The competition among women contestants may also increase women's political awareness. Political parties have still to realize that the issue pertaining to women is not an issue to be dealt with separately by women only. There are to be discussed and decided at the national level. The progress of nation depends on the development of manpower which includes 50% of women power.

Before the 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandated the reservation of seats for women at the local, certain states had already taken steps to implement women's reservations in panchayats. After Maharashtra adopted the recommendations of the Balwanta Rai Mehta committee in 1961, Karnataka initiated a 25 percent reservation for women in the mandal praja parishads along with an additional reservation for women from the schedule castes and schedule tribes. Similarly, in 1986, Andhra Pradesh established a reservation of between 22 percent and 25 percent for gram panchayat with the provision of co-opting two women in the panchayat samiti in addition to the elected women members. However, it is the constitutional amendments that had a transformative impact, resulting in the eventual elevation of over 1.45 million women to leadership positions in India's local governance. Presently, 20 states—Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttarakhand and West Bengal have expanded surpassed this threshold, with more than 50 percent representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions, indicating that women are now succeeding in electoral wards that were not specifically reserved for them.

Major Trends:

Certain key trends in the socioeconomic and demographic profile of elected women representatives are discernible, as are variations in the political careers of female and male representatives. These trends emerge from large-scale studies covering different states.

- Women representatives are found to be generally younger than their male counterparts, but also less educated. Education has a direct impact on their performance in office.

- Women representatives are predominantly married. This affects the time they can give for work compared to male representatives.
- Women are likely to rely on family members and neighbours to access information and conduct their work compared to men, who are more likely to source information from panchayat office bearers, government officials, and media.
- Most women representatives are first-time candidates with no training or experience, unlike their male counterparts, who are likely to have a prior association with some form of local politics.

The political scientist Mary Katzenstein has summed up the prominence of Indian women in politics as “the Mrs Gandhi anomaly”. According to Katzenstein, political factors, especially the mobilization of women during the struggle for independence and Gandhian ideology, as well as the importance of kinship, have combined to create opportunities for women to move into leadership positions.

Conclusion:

To develop a society it must be needed to develop the women of that society. For political development of women, Indian Government has been taking various provisions such as 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 which reserve one-third seats for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions. This Act actually gives a positive result. Women’s participation will much better if the government takes initiatives to reserve seats for women in parliament and state legislatures. But lack of good will of the political parties and the government yet the reservation bill is stalled in the lower house of the parliament.

Our democracy will become more meaningful when ordinary women can take part in political institutions or decision making institutions. In the existing circumstances, even talented women cannot stay in politics on their own steam, especially when they are married and have families. So, need to change the attitudes towards women.

Our socio-cultural norms also laid on the way of women’s development. Especially in India, societies are maintained by various religious norms. These customs and norms confined women into households. So, first of all we have to eliminate all those customs and religious norms which actually on the way of women’s development.

No nation could stand if it discriminates against any of its citizens, and no society could claim to be a part of civilized world unless it treated its women on par with men. This statement was made by our Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Monmohan Singh while inaugurating a national workshop on “women’s Role in Nation Building- from Panchayat to Parliament”. So it is most essential to provide equal status to women to develop the whole country.

References:

1. Manjusha Sharma; “Women’s Participation in Gram Panchayats: A Study in Haryana” in Shiv Raj Singh(eds.)2003, Public Administration in the New Millennium- Challenges and Prospects; new Delhi; Anamika, p.216
2. www.assamassembly.gov.in
3. The Hindu, January 31,2023
4. Mishra, S.N.and Mishra,S.S.(1993): Roads to Model Panchayati Raj: Review of Panchayati raj Acts in the context of 73rd Amendment, Mittal Publications, New Delhi.
5. Stefanie Strulik, (2004): Women’s Empowerment in the Context of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, ISS Occasional Paper: Institute of Sciences, Dept. of Sociology, University of Bielefeld, Germany.

6. M.D.Bhuyan, “Rural Development Programme in Assam since Independence and overview”.
7. Sunder Raj, “People’s Participation in Rural Development”.