

**GENDER, DEMOCRACY AND EMPOWERMENT: GRAM PANCHAYATS AND
THE WOMEN OF INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

India has come a long way in including and strengthening the role of women in democratic decentralisation and policy making. This paper aims to look at how women engage themselves with Gram Panchayats from the perspectives of equity, socioeconomic justice and democratic decentralisation. There are three parts of the paper. The first part deals with the current status of women's engagement with Gram Panchayats and how the existing socio-legal frameworks have helped women in elevating their socio-political status while developing the institutions at the grassroots levels. In the first part, apart from direct engagement, the role of Self Help Groups is also sought to be examined. The second part deals with the problems that woman representatives and participants face. The list is long and an effort has been made to examine the reasons behind these problems and reach to a common conclusion in order to find viable solutions. The paper makes an attempt to find out how the sense and sensibility of women shape these grassroots democratic institutions and bring a hitherto overlooked aspect to decision making and prioritising. The third part is about the possible areas to work on in order to develop greater female participation and to empower the democratic institutions while empowering the women. The paper is based on descriptive and historical methods and strives to provide a theoretical analysis of the changing roles of women at the grassroots level.

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“For me, a better democracy is a democracy where woman do not only have the right to vote and to elect but to be elected “

Michelle Bachelet, Head of UN Women, former president and defense minister, Chile.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Women form 46 per cent of the total 13.41 lakh elected representatives in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) across the country.¹ While we see some positive changes brought in by some of the woman elected representatives, many others are still struggling even to attend a single Gram Sabha without the permission of their husbands or other relations. From poverty and illiteracy to unsupportive families and unwelcoming villagers, many women Sarpanch and Gram Panchayat members are fighting these odds on a daily basis. It has been seen that in states like Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh women Sarpanch have brought in new priorities in policy making at the village levels and have considerably changed the perspectives of the villagers,² there is still a long way to go for women participants en masse and an analysis of underpinning causes of opposition or hindrances will help in chalking out a training and policy framework to empower the women of rural India.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The Rig Veda mentions Sabha and Samiti, assemblies where the elders in the villages came together and helped the Rajan in taking policy decisions. The scriptures also talk about women participating in these Sabhas along with their husbands.³ During the later times, as would be seen in the further future, the villages were always self-reliant and governed locally. Although the Uttaramerur inscription gives accounts of the Chola village administration, there have not been any concrete evidence of participation of women in such assemblies. While the Panch system continued for the longest time in Indian villages and the revenue system was headed by local, hereditary officials,⁴ the current model of local self-government started to come into existence only after the advent of the British Raj in India.

¹ 'Women Constitute 46 Per Cent Representation In Panchayati System: Minister' (www.ndtv.com, 2017) <<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/women-constitute-46-per-cent-representation-in-panchayati-system-minister-1256125>> accessed 25 November 2017.

² Abha Sharma, 'Discarding Veils, Embracing Change: Rajasthan'S Extraordinary Women Sarpanches' (www.thebetterindia.com, 2017) <<https://www.thebetterindia.com/13654/discarding-veils-embracing-change-rajasthans-extraordinary-women-sarpanches/>> accessed 25 November 2017.

³ Upinder Singh, *A History Of Ancient And Early Medieval India: From The Stone Age To 12Th Century* (7th edn, Pearson 2009). 188-192

⁴ J L Mehta, *Advanced Study in the History of Medieval India* (2nd edn, Sterling Publishers Private Limited 1979) 171

In 1882, Lord Ripon's Resolution started financial decentralisation giving more power to the local bodies. In 1908, the Royal Commission on decentralisation recommended devolution of petty judicial powers to village Panchayats. The engagement of women with PRIs started when Women's Indian Association was established in 1917 with the main aim of fighting for women's suffrage in the local, provincial and central administration. The princely state of Travancore-Cochi was the first to grant women the right to vote in local Elections. In 1921, Madras became the first British Province to grant women's suffrage in local body elections and Bombay and United Provinces followed suit within months. In 1935, the Government of India Act gave provinces more autonomy and demarcated taxation relations between local bodies and provinces.

In the Post-independence era, organisation of village panchayats was included as one of the directives principles of state Policy in the constitution of India and Rajasthan became the first state to establish PRIs in 1959. 1992 was an important year when the 73rd constitutional amendment was enacted and provisions were made for 33% reservation of seats for women in village Panchayats and also for the reservation of offices of chairpersons. The next major step came in 2009 when the Union Cabinet approved 50% reservation for women in local self-government bodies.

3. CURENT SITUATION:

The understanding of the existing socio-political scenario is necessary in formulating a cohesive policy for the empowerment of Gram Panchayats through women's participation. After the 2009 central approval for 50% reservation of seats for the female candidates in local self-government institutions, the number of women elected in PRI's have rose to 46.14% of the total elected representatives.⁵ However, we need to look much beyond this facade to analyse the situation in which these representatives work, the policies that are near and dear to them and the work they wish to take up.

There are two paths in which women engage with Gram Panchayats. One, those who contest and win (or lose) elections at the village levels. Two, those who participate in the Gram Sabhas and not in the politically motivated electoral process. Both the process being

⁵ Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, "Status of Representation Of Women In Pris" (2016).

equally important for the empowerment and participation of women in grassroots politics, an attempt has been made to look at them separately.

1. The Contestants:

Engagement with the Gram Panchayats starts with filling up the nomination forms and for those who win, continues till one's term is ended. It has been observed⁶ that a whopping 76% of the women candidates in Gram Panchayat elections attribute their husbands, family or other relations as the source of their motivation to participate in the electoral process while only 7% agree that they are self-motivated. As to the electoral process, more women participate in filling up the nomination forms, the big number being attributed to the fact that the Election Commission has made it mandatory for the candidate to be physically present. This is contrasted by a very low participation in non-mandatory but nonetheless important activities like collection of funds.

Without denying the crucial role reservations have played in increasing the representation of women, the author would like to point out that these women might not have been able to enter the governance system if not for the constitutional mandate.⁷

2. The Participants:

While 27% of those who do participate in Gram Sabhas were found to be participating always and 29% participated often, meaningful deliberations and productive participation still seems like a distant dream for many of the womenfolk. This is because only 34% of the woman surveyed had actively participated in a Gram Sabha. When prodded about the reasons of non-participation, 34% of the women cited male domination as the primary reason, and 17% said gender discrimination exists in Panchayats.

It can be seen that in processes where the presence of a candidate is mandatory, like the filling up of the nomination form, greater participation is seen. While in more 'optional, nonetheless crucial for election activities like collection of funds, the participation is close to none. Additionally, while the women are attending Gram Sabhas, they are not voicing their

⁶ Goutam Sadhu and Chandra Bhushan Sharma, 'Factors Influencing Participation Of Women In Panchayati Raj Institution: A Study Of Rajasthan' (2014) 3 International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR) <<https://www.ijsr.net/archive/v3i11/T0NUMTQxNTQx.pdf>> accessed 25 November 2017.

⁷ Ganapathy Palanithurai, *Dynamics Of New Panchayati Raj System In India: Empowering Women* (Concept Publishing Company 2002).58

opinions effectively. What the data conveys is very clear, representation and participation are two very distinct processes. What 50% reservation ensures is the representation of women. And there exist a plethora of social, economic and cultural reasons hindering the full participation of women in Gram Panchayats.

4. THE PROBLEMS:

1. Attitude, perception and family:

A research article⁸ analysing the problems faced by women Gram Panchayat members in Beed district of Maharashtra states that 99.07% of the women surveyed said that male members of their families dominate their decision-making process while on another account, a disturbing 98.14% claimed that the attitude of their families is unsupportive for doing Panchayat work. This is surely not the case of Maharashtra only, as evident from the speech PM Narendra Modi delivered in 2015, calling out for ending the ‘Sarpanch Pati’ culture.

The legal mechanisms for reservations have not been helpful in changing the traditional approach of the society and the family members towards women who are assuming leadership and participatory positions in their villages. Their participation is still being perceived as an act of rebel, or a ‘permission’ that they have been granted by their male counterparts. Moreover, innumerable accounts have been reported where women candidates were used merely as proxies for retaining power by the male politicians.⁹ The case of Sipra Mandal from Ramnagar Gram Panchayat of Mahakalapada block of Odisha serves as an example. In January 2017, she was contesting Panchayat elections for the first time after the 50% reservation norm was implemented. Her husband, Mrutyunjay, however, was elected as the sarpanch of the same bloc for three times in a row.¹⁰ The problem lies in the perception that women are by nature inferior to men and are not capable of taking decisions. The patriarchal upbringing and surroundings make it difficult for many male members to cooperate and obey the female leaders, evident from the fact that 93.51% female members cited it as a reason in the above-mentioned study.

⁸ J M Deshmukh, A M Kshatriya and A V Shinde, ‘Constraints Faced By Women Member Of Gram Panchayat’ (2013) 8 Agriculture Update. 168

⁹ Brijesh Kumar, ‘Sarpanch By Proxy’ *Governance Now* (2017) <<http://www.governancenow.com/views/columns/sarpanch-proxy>> accessed 3 August 2017.

¹⁰ Express News Service, ‘Women As Puppets, Male Kins Pull Strings In Odisha Gram Panchayat Elections’ *The New Indian Express* (2017) <<http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2017/jan/28/women-as-puppets-male-kin-pull-strings-in-odisha-gram-panchayat-elections-1564343.html>> accessed 3 August 2017.

2. Economic dependence

A study published by the Ministry of Women and Child Development¹¹ states that 100% of the elected as well as general female members of Gram Sabhas think that unemployment is the primary reason behind them being treated unequally by the male members. Economic dependence plays a crucial role in changing the perception of women about themselves and adds to their self-confidence. A case in point is the participants of various Self-help Groups (SHGs) where their say in family matters increased when they started to earn from the SHG's business. The hitherto mentioned data about marginal participation of women in election funding processes also points a finger towards their economic dependence. This situation hampers the participation in two ways. Firstly, it becomes easier to place a dependent candidate as a proxy. And secondly, the voices and opinions of the dependent women from households are neglected during the Gram Sabhas and their husband's or relation's opinions are taken as their opinions as well.

3. Violence, Corruption and Character

The village politics in India has no longer remained the ideal of Mahatma Gandhi's imagination. It has become a breeding ground for money, muscle and manpower mafias. This situation makes it difficult for first-generation women contestants to contest and win or lose the elections. The elected candidates also face threats of violence, or character assassination from the leaders. An interview¹² of Jagrani Devi, the Gram Pradhan of Hamirpur in UP elected in the 2000 election, taken during a symposium in 2002, throws light on the issue very clearly wherein she states that, "Certain problems are always there. Some threaten you with your life whereas others want you to behave like a woman".

4. Cooperation and Confidence, or lack thereof:

Elected members of the Gram Sabhas often face hostile environments while working with their male subordinates. The orders given are often not followed and the decision-making process is stalled. While we are lauding the emergence of All-Women Gram Panchayats in many states, the fact that such Panchayats also emerge because the male members do not wish to work with the females should not be ignored.¹³

¹¹ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 'Problems And Prospects Of Emerging Women Leadership In Scheduled Tribes In Rajasthan'.

¹² Sahabhangi Shikshan Kendra, Interview with Jagrani Devi (2002).

¹³ Seemanthini Niranjana, 'Gender Inflections Within Panchayat Raj', *The Violence of Development: The Politics of Identity, Gender, Social Inequality in India* (Kali for Women 2002).

While the Gram Sabhas are a public affair, many participants hesitate to speak in front of the male members of the family and village elders and seem to be quiet in spite of having original and insightful ideas. Moreover, an alarming 91.67% female member surveyed¹⁴ have stated that they do not participate in the decision-making process because of lack of confidence.

While there are incidental and individual reasons like observance of purdah for some or illiteracy for others, the above four have been included in this writing as the representative and underlying issues that female Gram Panchayat members and participants face.

Before going into the details of what are the necessary steps to be taken to change this scenario, it is important to see what impact does participation have on the women who are participating vis-a-vis the influence they have on their respective Gram Panchayats.

5. IMPACT OF FEMALE PARTICIPATION:

1. On the Participants:

As the discussion above clearly points out, Gram Panchayats are a platform for public discussion and decision making. While many female participants still face the burden of their male counterparts or depend upon their husbands, etc., those who do participate willingly and productively have reported important changes in their behaviour and other's perception towards them. A sociological study of the role Gram Panchayats have played in the empowerment of women in Karnataka is a case in point.¹⁵ The observations made by the surveyed women are as follows.

A. Sociological impact:

It has been observed that the participation of women in Gram Sabhas can change their social status in their families as well as in villages. The hitherto unheard-of voices are presented by these women and, thus, they start commanding more respect from the villagers. Gram Sabhas also give an opportunity to womenfolk to step out of their houses and participate in community building. They also become an integral part of the decision-making

¹⁴ J M Deshmukh, A M Kshatriya and A V Shinde, 'Constraints Faced By Women Member Of Gram Panchayat' (2013) 8 Agriculture Update.

¹⁵ Kavya C N and Manjunatha S, 'A Sociological Study On The Role Of Gram Panchayats In Women Empowerment In Karnataka State' (2015) 7 IJCRR.

process. This has also been seen to reflect in their households and the participants have reported to gain more respect within their families too.

B. Economic impact:

70% of the women participants surveyed¹⁶ have stated that their standard of living conditions has increased due to taking up various administrative roles in the Gram Panchayats. However, this is truer in case of the elected females and not in the case of mere participants. Active involvement in economic decisions has also made many women capable to shoulder such responsibilities within their families and, thus, has increased the economic independence of these women.

C. Psychological impact:

Gram Sabhas have helped in increasing the self-confidence of the female participants. This is because, the village meetings give them an opportunity to voice their opinions and provide them with a sense of validation mostly lacking in an otherwise patriarchal family surrounding. This could be very clear from the fact that 86% of the females surveyed have stated that the participation in Gram Sabhas has decreased the inferiority complex they used to have.

2. On the Working of Gram Sabhas:

Women bring their own sense and sensibilities to the working of the Gram Sabhas. The points to be discussed and the way in which discussions happen change at the village level due to the presence of female members.

A. Issues taken up:

It has been observed that many female Sarpanch are keen on working on issues which have traditionally been ignored by the male members. Sanitation and education, for example, are the primary areas that gain focus with the females in offices. Also, the female participants discuss issues such as Girls Education more frequently. Female participation helps in making the policies of the Gram Panchayat more inclusive and diverse. In a nutshell, the female participants help in empowering other females of the village and make the environment more conducive for long-term changes.

¹⁶ Kavya C N and Manjunatha S, 'A Sociological Study On The Role Of Gram Panchayats In Women Empowerment In Karnataka State' (2015) 7 IJCRR.

B. Working of the Gram Panchayat:

It could be observed in many villages that the presence of women in office and in meetings have worked as a catalyst to bring down the level of violence. The traditional mindset, proving harmful in many areas works as a barrier for the male members to use physical or verbal abuse in the presence of women members, thus, reducing the level of violence in the workings of the Gram Sabha.

C. Corruption:

Higher level of women in government machinery is strongly associated with lower level of perceived corruption in democracies with higher electoral accountability.¹⁷ While no blanket statements can be made regarding women officials in Gram Sabhas, these women have been traditionally seen to be less corrupt than their male counterparts. Having said that, it needs to be noted that the less corruption could be attributed to majority of the women officials being the first-time politicians or the general lack of economic dependence of these women participants.¹⁸

A comparison between the reasons for women to not participate in the Gram Sabhas and the impact of their participation shows that their weaknesses start to change once they are given appropriate opportunities. But there still exist major flaws in both the initiation and participation mechanisms which we need to work on in order to make the Gram Panchayats a true vehicle of democratic decentralisation and inclusive empowerment.

6. WAY FORWARD:

1. Representation is the first step:

Although it has been said that reservations will not promote cohesive and sustainable empowerment for women, it cannot be ignored that they serve as the first steps towards empowerment. In India, 19 out of 29 states have 50% reservation for women in local self-government bodies. The first major step at the policy level could be making efforts towards implementing the 50% reservation policy in all the states. Policy-level initiatives must also be

¹⁷ J Esarey and L A Shwindt-Bayer, 'Women's Representation, Accountability And Corruption In Democracies' (2017) 1 British Journal of Political Science.

¹⁸ Dr. Naomi Hossain and Dr. Celestine Musembi, 'Corruption, Accountability and Gender: Understanding The Connections' (UNDP and UNIFEM 2010) <<http://www.undp.org/content/dam/aplaws/publication/en/publications/womens-empowerment/corruption-accountability-and-gender-understanding-the-connection/Corruption-accountability-and-gender.pdf>> accessed 25 November 2017.

taken to ensure that the reservation schemes are implemented immediately and transparently and there are no gaps between the quota granted and the actual female representation.

2. Sensitisation:

As evident from the discussion above, the attitude of the family members and male members of the Gram Panchayats is one of the major hurdles behind the entry and effective participation of female Panchayat Members. Long-term campaign-based efforts are needed to change this situation. The planning of such schemes must be done on a decentralised basis so as to include local needs in the sensitisation methodologies. Common training programmes for male and female elected members could serve as a platform for making the elected male members more cooperative and aware regarding rights and powers of the female members.

3. Capacity building of women:

In order to achieve the aim of women empowerment sustainably and effectively, we need to start working on not only the elected Gram Panchayat members but also the general female citizens of a particular village. It is only when more women start participating in the regular, day-to-day workings of the Gram Panchayat and become a vocal force in the Gram Sabhas that the environment conducive to the growth of female leadership will start to emerge. Indian villages still show parity between the male and female literacy rate. Bridging that gap would be the first step. Making women aware about the functions of the Gram Sabhas and their civic responsibilities would help in changing their attitude towards participation.

4. Capacity building of elected women representatives:

Because a staggering number of female candidates are used as proxies by their husbands or other male family members, they are never given a real chance to work at the decision-making levels. Lack of awareness about the functioning of the Gram Sabhas has been reported by many women as the reason for not being an active member. Structured initiation and training programmes should be a part and parcel of Gram Panchayats working after every election. The training should include, among other things, the basic understanding of the civic liabilities of an official, the legalities included and an induction programme with the district officials, along with basics of information technology. This, along with the previously discussed efforts, will help in reducing the number of Sarpanch Pati and proxy candidates.

5. Economic Independence:

Economic dependence leads to overall submissive attitude by women in all socio-political matters. Even a small-scale employment at a village level goes a long way in giving women a sense of independence and boosting their self-image, thus reflecting in the better participation in Gram Sabhas. Especially, the younger women could be targeted for this approach. The process should start from developing vocational skills and giving job-oriented training. Women's networking programmes could also help to achieve a sense of independence.

6. Self-help Groups:

SHGs could be the vehicle of change in many villages. Women's collectives and SHGs could be made the focal point for initiating majority of the above-discussed policies. SHGs are well-established institutions in many states of the country. They help in making women economically independent and also increase their confidence, two things that are crucial for better participation of females in Gram Panchayats. It has also been observed that when women participate in SHGs, they take more part in decision making at home and the attitude of their family members changes. Thus, they work on social, economic and psychological fronts to elevate themselves to a higher level of empowerment. Strengthening of such groups and tying them up with Panchayat works could be beneficial.

7. CONCLUSION

Gram Panchayats are a quintessential Indian experiment towards democratic decentralisation. They are the first point for the introduction of civic and political processes for majority of the Indians. Gram Panchayats and Gram Sabhas have proved useful in disseminating government schemes and in identifying beneficiaries, etc. But there are some serious flaws in the functioning of the Gram Panchayats which we need to address in order to make them democratic institutions and not mere administrative set ups. When these grassroots institutions are becoming vexed with political malice along with money and muscle power, the inherent motives behind their foundations are threatened.

While the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution made some very necessary changes in the governance of these Gram Panchayats, there are still miles to go especially in relation to the Village Panchayats and the participation of women in effective governance. The inherent structure of the patriarchal family system and village society makes it difficult

for women to truly participate and contribute in village governance. There is a wide gap between what the law enables, i.e., representation and what is the aim of that law, i.e., participation. It is unsettling to note that women empowerment through Gram Sabhas seems to be a distant dream in today's socio-political scenario of rural India.

Empowerment in its real sense is not only about making rules and regulations for more representation. It will also not manifest itself from stray examples like an all-women Gram Panchayat in Maharashtra. The true manifestation of empowerment is possible only when every woman in a village acquires greater control over her own life. Unfortunately, the Gram Panchayats and the Gram Sabhas have failed drastically to achieve this aim. What we need is an institution which gives the rural women a chance to express their views freely, an avenue to discuss and debate over their ideas which are hitherto untapped and enhance their confidence and self-image. If the rule bound structure of current village administration is unable to provide such possibilities, then we need to look beyond them at voluntary networking groups and women's collectives as a first step to make women self-aware before they start participating in the Gram Panchayats.

However, both these processes should happen simultaneously as greater representation on political fronts will be beneficial for enhancing the social status of women at village levels. The government and the voluntary sector need to work on both legal and social levels to realise the aim of democratic decentralisation and grassroots empowerment. Considering the changes that elected women representatives bring in to the democratic set up of a Gram Panchayat, it is high time to realise that a greater participation of women is going to be a win-win situation. We need to look beyond the technicalities and dig deep into the psychological and social analysis in order to make Gram Panchayats truly inclusive and decentralised.