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POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN KARNATAKA

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Abstract:

Empowerment of women aims to achieve gender equality in the society. As such, political empowerment aims to achieve gender equality in political participation of women at panchayat level. The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution enabled Indian women for participation in politics at the panchayat level. As such, the Government of Karnataka also adopted the political participation of women and provided reservation to women at panchayats. The present paper described the political participation of women at national and Karnataka state and also examined the political empowerment of women through panchayat raj institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Panchayat Raj is a local self governing institution of a village or a group of villages, based on democratic principles. It establishes strong linkages between villages, talukas and districts. It is the base of democratic pyramid in the country. It involves people in decision making, bring in awareness and motivate people and under stand the local problems, needs and to appreciate the local resources and skills. "Panchayati Raj institutions, being units of local self government, came as a state subject under the constitution and the states and union territories were free to design their structure, powers and functions keeping in view their local resources. As a result, some states opted for three tier system some for two tier system and yet another for one tier" (Ambedkar, 2000).

According to rural cultural heritage of India, the word "Panchayat", literally means an assembly of five wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community. They were considered of incarnation of god (Panch Parameshwar). The Panchayat had wide spectrum of activities covering executive, administrative, development and judiciary.

The advent of British Rule in India marked the end of the traditional village Panchayat. The introduction of formal judicial and administrative system, modern means of transport and communications, modern education and political stability abolished the system of village Panchayats. However, the British government with a view to preserving and stabilizing its political control over rural areas gradually adopted various measures for reorganizing the village Panchayats. The British Government appointed a Special Commission on democratic decentralization in 1909. This Commission stressed the need for revitalizing the village Panchayats for handling local affairs. For example, the new Panchayats were entrusted with functions like looking after village sanitation, lighting and were also authorized to try minor cases like theft, simple hurt, offence the cattle-tresspass, etc. However, the new Panchayats during British rule functioned more like municipalities than as agents of social transformation and development. The British never thought of empowering rural people or women.

With independence, the whole social, economic and political scenario of India underwent a significant change. India accepted a modern Constitution based on principles of democracy, equality and freedom. The Constitution mainly focused on the welfare and empowerment of weaker sections. In a democratic system, devolution of power to the people becomes very important. For it enables the people to participate in decision-making process as effective and responsible citizens. "Decentralization through Panchayat Raj Institutions is the way to combine popular responsibility with dispersal of decision making

powers” (Krishnan, 1992).

PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN KARNATAKA:

In 1956, the Karnataka State came into being. In 1959, the Karnataka Village Panchayats and Local Boards Act was passed. The Act, though it gave a certain degree of uniformity to Panchayat Raj Institutions in the State, it failed to secure any amount of democratic decentralization, as the Act did not confer real powers and resources to the Panchayat Raj Institutions.

With a view to making the Panchayat bodies more responsive to the needs and problems of rural society, a committee was constituted with Kondajji Basappa as Chairman to recommend a suitable structure for the state. Following the broad guidelines of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee, the Kondajji Basappa Committee recommended a three-tier panchayat system for Karnataka. Accordingly, a bill was introduced in the assembly in 1964. However, both the ruling party in neither the state nor the government was interested in such radical steps and as a result nothing happened in this direction. So much so that elections to the panchayat bodies could not be held for a decade – 1975-85. The state waited till 1983 when the Janata Party came to power. The Karnataka Government accepted and implemented the Panchayat Raj system in 1985 based on the model proposed by the Ashok Mehta Committee viz., two-tier system (Bhargava, 1979).

It is plain that the government in Karnataka and the then Congress (I) never believed in decentralization of power to the rural people. It shows how the Congress (I) government discounted the importance of Panchayat bodies as forms of grass-roots democracy. This was the situation in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the advent of non-Congress (I) governments in West Bengal, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh brought the Panchayats back into focus. First and foremost, five yearly elections to the Panchayat bodies have been made obligatory. Three such elections were held in West Bengal, where the United Front Government was in office since 1977, while the successive Congress (I) government in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh had put the clock back (Bhargava, 1979).

It has been argued that the democratic decentralization has widened the base of democracy in India by involving the marginalized and the women in the process of governance. It is also observed that the values of caste loyalty, patriarchy and gerontocracy have given way to the egalitarian principles of social justice, equality and development in the rural politics. One of the distinct changes that have come out as a result of democratic decentralization is the emergence of women leadership in the Panchayats. The patriarchic society in India had confined women for a long time only to the household chores and denied them participation in public activities. The traditional caste Panchayats which were decision-making bodies of the villages denied access to women as they did in case of Dalits. The rural socio-political life was upper caste male dominated and women were mere voiceless spectators. However, the democratic decentralization has brought revolutionary changes in the rights of women at the grass root level governance. The constitutional mandate making one-third of the seats in the Panchayat reserved for women has brought drastic changes in the male dominated decision making traditional bodies. The rise of women leadership in male dominated politics at the grass root level is a significant development in post independent India. It is noteworthy that there are more than 1 million elected women Panchayat members in the country which is 42 per cent of the total elected Panchayat members (Parsa, V.2006). Thus in some of the states the number of women Panchayat members exceeds the proportion that is provided in the law.

However, there are concerns about the functioning and performance of women Panchayat members. This has gained a wider academic attention in the country. The studies carried on participation of women in Panchayats so far have addressed broadly three issues. Firstly, the inability of women Panchayat members, presidents and vice-presidents in carrying out their functions in the Panchayats. Under this kind of studies it is reported that because of illiteracy and lack of experience women Panchayat leaders are unable to discharge their duties and exercise their power in an efficient manner. Thus they become easy preys in the hands of the men folk (husbands, fathers, father-in-law etc.) who pretend that they themselves are the rightful occupiers of these offices and many of them carry visiting cards calling themselves “sarpanchapati” (Tandon, 2004). Secondly the oppositions and problems posed by the male dominated society to the women Panchayat members have been addressed. It has been reported by several studies that the patriarchic social order comes in the way of women's' effective working as Panchayat leaders. When some women leaders become more assertive, the men folk abuses by calling them as brazen and shameless (Jain, 1996). Thirdly the lack of involvement of women in Panchayat Raj institutions has become another issue of the focus. It is observed that women Panchayat leaders consider their positions in Panchayats as ornamental in nature and they feel that maintaining family pride and culture is of paramount importance to them. Such women Panchayat leaders do not mingle with rural women folk and try to address their problems. They ritually attend the Panchayat meetings and fail to contribute to the process of governance

(Banerjee, 1998).

It is believed that long standing tradition of democratic decentralization and radical provisions of reservation for Dalits, backward classes and women have drastically changed the political scenario in rural Karnataka. However, it is observed that most of the members of Panchayat from reserved constituencies are illiterates and inexperienced and are controlled either by the relatives or the vested interests, so the very purpose of reservation introduced is defeated (Aziz, 1998). There are some studies that talk about positive developments in the field of grass root level governance in Karnataka. Banerjee (1998) observes that women from the lower socio-economic order have been emerging as effective leaders of Panchayats. In fact, her study shows that women from the well off sections of the society lacks initiative and are dummy representatives who are controlled by their family members.

GRAM PANCHAYATS, RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT:

Empowerment of women in modern India also means of their adapting to the challenges of public life. Once women step out of their family (household) to engage and participate in economic and public activities, they are prone to encounter stiff opposition from male sections (rowdies, bad characters and anti-socials) in terms of harassment, mental torture and sexual abuse both at the work place and outside. Therefore, it is necessary that women develop courage, the patience to fight and tolerance to tackle and handle problems of exploitation in public life. Further, the women entered in politics have also developed in all the aspects, such socially, economically, personally, politically and educationally. The gram panchayats are first steps in the women's political empowerment.

Earlier, Gram Panchayats have not played any significant role in developing rural society. Plans and programmes in principle meant for the weaker sections were cornered by upper castes and classes. Much worse, Panchayat Raj system created greater socio-economic inequalities in rural society. Studies have shown that Gram Panchayat could not become an instrument of transformation of rural society.

It is unfortunate to record that the very Government of India could not perceive the significance of women's empowerment, not to speak of Gram Panchayats. It is only recently, the concept of Women's Empowerment has caught the attention of planners and policy makers.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment: A New Chapter for Women's Empowerment:

Political reservation for weaker sections has been an important tool of ushering in equal opportunities for development since the advent of British rule in India. Political reservation for the SCs and STs and OBCs has ensured vast social, economic and political opportunities for mobility.

The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India in 1992 introduced a new political initiative to empower women. The Constitution Amendment Act, 1992, Article 243 D (3) reads: Not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women (SCs and STs) and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.

Salient Features of 73rd Amendment Act:

The salient features of 73rd Amendment Act are as follows:

1. A minimum number of seats and political offices for women are provided for only Gram Panchayats,
2. Reservation of seats for women applies only to directly elected members in every panchayat,
3. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats including the number of seats for women belonging to SCs and STs in every Panchayat have to be reserved for women and further that such seats have to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat,
4. Offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats should be reserved to women, SCs and STs at each level of Panchayats,
5. The number of seats to be reserved for the SCs and STs in every panchayat should, as nearly as possible, be in proportion to the share of population of the Panchayat concerned.
6. The Constitution provides for reservation of seats and offices of chairpersons only to the directly elected members of the Panchayats, but not to the other members like the chairpersons of the lower level panchayats, the backward class citizens or other ex-officio members.

The Panchayati Raj has provided a common forum for social, economic, political and legal advancement of rural women. Now women are more than nominal in the political bodies and this is an epoch-making step in the women's empowerment and political participation. Women are now involved in

the local political process and are confronted with complex situations while carrying out their tasks as local leaders. One of the important issues plaguing the country is widespread corruption and grassroots level is no exception to corruption, nepotism and malpractices. Studies reveal that during elections there were many malpractices. The political parties do not follow any standard nor do they maintain records. Money and muscle still rule the elections. This is an extremely difficult situation for women to enter present politics.

As the decisions of the local government have a profound effect on the problems that concern women, effective participation in decision making is the direct implication. Effective participation demands skill knowledge and attitude which is at a large extent conspicuously absent in majority of women. The need for systematic training and orientation is therefore necessary to empower the women members to exercise their authority and to access the resources available to transform the existing conditions of existence to a better one. The political parties have to take a major responsibility in facilitating women's participation. Deliberate efforts should be made to place women members within and outside party organization. Electoral system, which is based on money and muscle power, should be changed. State funding of elections by creation of a separate election fund is a possibility. Least, but not the least, is the role of mass media in building awareness.

Reservation in local bodies has provided tremendous opportunity to women for their entry into the political arena. Being a step towards equality, the most striking participation of women in politics is found at this level. But numbers alone cannot indicate the adoption of gender sensitive policies. However, eventually it will lead to a gender perspective on issues and policies. The women being the members of the local authorities can play a better and effective role in attending the civic amenities. The local women leaders who form a crucial part of the government and manage the institution should be empowered in the light of the new developments. The need for training and orientation, therefore, cannot be undermined as an important part of "human capital formation" Increasing emphasis has to be laid on the role of human capital in development.

Apart from that, a Monitoring Cell should be constituted in the State, similar to the one existing at the Union level, to monitor and to supervise the implementation of the recommendations made by the State Finance Commissions.

List of 29 items (subjects) to be transferred to Panchayati Raj Institutions as per the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1992 are indicated below:

1. Agriculture and its extension.
2. Development of Land, Implementation of Land Reforms, Integration of Land Holdings, Soil Conservation.
3. Minor Irrigation, Water Management and Development of Watersheds.
4. Animal Husbandry, Poultry.
5. Fisheries.
6. Social Forestry and Horticulture.
7. Small Scale Industries.
8. All Small Scale Industries, including Food Processing Industries.
9. Khadi and Village Industries.
10. Rural Housing.
11. Drinking Water.
12. Fuel and Fodder.
13. Roads, Culverts, Bridges, Canals, Waterways and Communication net works.
14. Rural Electrification and Distribution of Power.
15. Non-conventional Energy.
16. Poverty Alleviation.
17. Technical Training and Vocational Education.
18. Education, including Primary and Secondary Education.
19. Adult and Non-Formal Education.
20. Libraries.
21. Cultural Affairs.
22. Markets and Shandies.
23. Hospitals, Primary Health Centers, Dispensaries, Health and Sanitation.
24. Family Welfare.
25. Women and Child Welfare.
26. Social Welfare, Welfare of handicapped including Mentally Handicapped.

27. Welfare of Weaker Sections, including the Welfare of SCs and STs.
28. Public Distribution System.
29. Maintenance of Social Assets.

The State Government has yet to transfer certain subjects to Local Bodies out of the above 29 items. The officers were given umpteen powers to divert the funds earmarked for rural development to other Departments. This has greatly diluted and weakened the role of the people's representatives in the entire set of things.

CONCLUSION:

It could be concluded that the new Gram Panchayat has played relatively positive role in providing infrastructure, employment opportunities and economic empowerment of women. Consequently, there is a change in the attitudes of rural women who are becoming conscious of education, employment, etc.

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