

International Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Indian Streams
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

Indian Streams Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial board. Readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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50 PERCENT WOMEN RESERVATION AND CHANGING POLITICS



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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

Indian democracy has a strong modern outlook for the new world on one hand and the other strong roots in socio-religious traditions inherited from the ancient past. The socio-cultural pluralism is the real strength and identity of Indian democracy. In view to deepen the democracy, India had taken an important step and put in place the elected gram panchayat (local elected body) at the village level by the 73rd Amendment of the constitution in 1993. One of the important features of this Amendment was to give reservations to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women. Understanding its increasing response and its capacity of instilling democratic values in rural local bodies, the government raised reservations of women in all tiers of Panchayat Raj system from 33 percent to at least 50 percents.

KEYWORDS

Women Reservation , Changing Politics

INTRODUCTION

The panchayat Raj system is a state subject. It is the prerogative of states to increase the quota of women reservation if the actual reservation in that state is less than 50 percent. It was Bihar state, which first offered 50 percent reservation to women in rural local bodies. Maharashtra followed the suit and provided 50 percent seats in local bodies for women in 2011.

Decentralisation of Democracy

India's 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandated far-reaching decentralization by establishing a three-tier system of district, block and village-level councils. The gram panchayat (GP) is the lowest tier of local government at village level. It comprises a sarpanch and council members who are elected from the panchayat's wards.

Rural bodies responsibilities include (i) provision of major public services such as health, education, drinking water, and roads; (ii) setting rates and administering local taxes; (iii) administration, formulation and implementation of local development plans; and (iv) selection of beneficiaries and implementation of social and economic programs established and paid for by the government. Gram sabhas are meant to monitor performance and increase democratic accountability. To give access of decentralization, women participation was increased to mitigate under-representation by females and other disadvantaged groups.

Women Participation in Rural Local Bodies in Maharashtra

Maharashtra had realized the importance of women's empowerment in the development of the country. The state had taken an initial step in the direction by introducing the Women's Bill in 1994. The political leadership thought that welfare programmes and schemes were not enough and that women's participation in the process of decision-making was crucial for women empowerment. Therefore, the Government had declared the Women's Policy II in 2001. These measures emphasized mainly atrocities against women, violence, laws regarding women, upliftment of their economy, the role of media, participation of NGOs, women-centric planning, development of self-help groups and public awareness about the rights and laws of women. As the part of women empowerment, the government declared 30% reservation for women in government and semi-government jobs, 33% reservation in politics of local self government bodies. But actual push was received in 2011 with the passage of 50% reservation in local self government bodies.

Reservation is a step towards the decentralization of the socio-political institutions. It is expected to be beneficial from the governance point of view. It is expected that the presence of women in the gram panchayat would better reflect the requirements and preferences of women in the society, who are the real shaping ingredient of Indian society. It increases the leadership opportunities to women in local bodies. It is a precedent that a female sarpanch increases the political participation of people in these villages. Such enhanced political participation is desirable in itself, but also may lead to better outcomes in terms of service delivery and thus be one of the mechanism linking the reservations to service delivery outcomes.

Political Reservation and Selection

The policy of reservations for women within the overall constraints and peculiarities is a significant boost for women empowerment. Presently female presence in India's state and national legislatures hovers at ten percent. Concerns that this limits the political voice available to women have led to the introduction and subsequent passage of a Reservation Bill in the Upper house of the Indian Parliament. The bill seeks to reserve 33% of India's state and national legislature positions for women. If implemented 181 out of the 543 National legislators and 1,370 out of the 4,109 State legislators would be women.

Women's contribution in the development of Maharashtra is vital. Women are leading in all spheres of life and Maharashtra feels proud of it. The present progress is the positive outcome of pro women policies. The growth in women's education and income is on rise in Maharashtra. However, deteriorating female birth rate is painful. The state government has been taking efforts to increase female birth rate. Though the number of girls in the age group 0 to 6 is seen on decline, the recent census 2011 has indicated the growth in the birth of girls. The government, though, is committed to improve birth ratio of girls and create favorable conditions so that the society will welcome the birth of a girl child. It seems that the changing time and social circumstances are posing greater challenges to women. The recent incidents of violence against women have prompted the need to give a serious thought to women's safety. Strict laws are not the only solution to this problem. It is the need of the hour to change the mindset of people so that women are respected in the society.

Women Participations and Challenges

The growing participation of women is being appreciated by the world. On women participation in local politics, in 2007 the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democratic Index gave a score of 7.68 out of 10. India ranked of 35 out of 167 countries. This in itself may not seem bad, but it is a well known fact that India has a democracy with some flaws. Widespread illiteracy of the population and corruption in the political system are some of the degrading features.

Further, 'status of women' in India is quite inferior when compared to the other countries. The Global Gender Gap Report 2010 points out that India ranked 112 out of 134 countries. Similarly, UNDP's Gender-related development index (GDI) and various approaches to improve upon it, India is in the bottom third of all countries.

There is also the fear that a women sarpanch may become just a front for the 'real' sarpanch who would be somebody from her family, usually her husband. Thus it is unclear whether female sarpanchs can make a difference. According to a study, some 80% women sarpanchs in Tamil Nadu indicated that their official decisions were to be influenced by their husbands, potentially pointing towards limited autonomy in decision-making.

Further, India is characterized by large gender gaps in key human development indicators such as child mortality and malnutrition as well as levels of antenatal coverage, contraceptive use, adolescent fertility, and maternal mortality that are much worse than what is found in countries with similar or even lower levels of per capita income.

According to a social researcher Anderson, discrimination against females originates in marriage practices and caste structures. Despite government efforts these practices are still prevalent in the country. Despite high overall growth since the mid-1990s, some studies suggest that gender gaps widened.

There are different cultural and societal barriers in increasing active participations of women in politics. Some of the factors could be noted as sexual violence, discrimination and illiteracy.

Sexual violence

Some of the social thinkers regard sexual violence as one of the main obstacles in the women's participation in socio-political affairs. A 2011 study found that 24 percent of Indian men have committed sexual violence at some point in their lives. Martha Nussbaum states that violence affects women's participation in socio-political activities.

Discrimination

Although the Constitution of India has removed inequalities, discrimination continues among castes and gender. Widespread discrimination is one of the major impediments resisting women from participating in politics. Thus, women lack leadership experience in political activities. Impact of discrimination is further increased by caste system. Dalit women are continuously deprived for their political future.

Illiteracy

India has one of the largest illiterate populations. According to United Nations' reports in 2014 points out that there are 287 million adults in India who are illiterate. Literacy among women is only 53.7 percent as against 75.3 percent literacy of men. Illiteracy limits the understanding of political systems and issues.

Female Leaders and Public Good Outcomes

A number of influential studies have found that India's efforts to increase female participation in political processes and decision-making had significant impacts. An India-wide study notes that reservations create opportunities which many women are able to utilize. In Maharashtra female policy makers who have come to power through quotas provide more public goods that benefit and are valued by female voters such as water and roads. Mandated changes in female leadership prompted by quotas were also found to increase the quality of political processes and prompt greater female participation in gram sabha meetings in South India.

In terms of outcomes, reservations were associated with higher levels of child survival, an effect that could arise because female leaders, who are more attuned to the needs of child health, helped to improve access to and use of services such as antenatal care and public birth facilities. This in turn translates into significantly higher levels of breastfeeding and immunization. The impacts of reservations can be felt in other spheres as well; phased introduction of reservations at state level is used to argue that female reservations gave women greater voice, resulting in increased reporting of crimes against women and greater resistance to violence. Reserved seats occupied by low-caste or tribal females are also argued to have resulted in higher levels of investment in health and early education and greater efforts to implement redistributive land reforms and inheritance legislation favorable to women.

Impact of Women Participation on Indian Politics

Different studies made on the women reservation find significant and positive impacts of reservation on Indian politics. It put positive effects on women. It also benefited lower caste groups who earlier had failed to improve the condition in rapidly changing society. This implies that, for disadvantaged women, the net effect of reservations. At village level, most states now reserve one third of council members and sarpanch positions for women. By comparison, the share of positions reserved to ST/SCs equals the population share of the ST/SC population.

At district level, it appears that reservation of positions in the legislature for scheduled castes but not tribes improves access to education facilities, mainly primary schools, for relevant constituencies.

Inspired by 50 percent women reservation in rural bodies, the centre government positively mulling on provide 50 percent quota for women in urban local bodies. The centre government is keen to improve status of women by imparting gender perspective to designing urban policies and programme in the country. The rural representation proved fruitful increasing women inclination towards active participation in local bodies. It also strengthens their political understanding on state and national issues.

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