

Panchayati Raj And Women in India : A Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

Historically, women's role in politics has been negligible. They have always been confined to domestic life. Outside area was, primarily, an area of activity for only men. That's why women were assumed to be less capable at carrying out the political activities. However, feminists reject these views as irrational. Though, the 'male stream' researches always tend to stamp them as irrelevant political actors; sometimes even 'scientifically'. Several organizations came up before independence to uplift the status of women in India. As a result, the horizon of their activities increased. Some of them actively participated in the independent movement as well, but, only, as undercover agents. They could not carve out a niche for themselves in politics. The real turning point was the introduction of 73rd Amendment Act. The present paper attempts to evaluate the 73rd Amendment Act of Indian Constitution with a gender perspective on the basis of various studies. It examines the various aspects of women reservation in political area, in the context of India.

Keywords: Panchayti Raj, women, politics, gender perspective

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Introduction

The Indian political system, despite various political rights enshrined in the Constitution for women, has largely been unable to provide a legitimate political space to women. In spite of the growing literacy rate and so-called social emancipation of the marginalized groups, the political participation of women is still peripheral. This makes one reconsider the earlier accepted categories of evaluating women's empowerment through indicators of quantity and quality of political participation. External indices such as women's voting behaviour, representation in political parties, and participation in elections or holding of public office at various levels do not provide any insight beyond numbers. This has led to a false sense of gender emancipation (Hazarika 2008).

Historically, women's role in politics has been negligible in this country; rather, their contribution to the politics of state has remained invisible. They have always been confined to domestic life. The lack of women's involvement in the political domain is mainly because of the huge amount of time they have had to spend on domestic work, childrearing, and other mundane activities. These are viewed as a responsibility and duty of women, limiting her space to the hearth and household chores. For most of them, the world outside their homes was an unknown area; it was an area of activity for only men. Since women were assumed to be less capable at carrying out political tasks than men; thus, less interested in politics. Any social activity outside this domain of women is seen as an additional burden on her.

Feminists reject these views which are reflected in the work of the dominant academia too. The irrational popular perceptions are thus awarded a 'scientific' stamp by the 'male stream' research for they always end to see women as irrelevant political actors in the politics of a state. That women behave in less authenticable political ways than men is an absurd argument. However, careful researches have shown that gender differences are not a major factor in voting behaviour, but other issues such as social class and age are more important and relevant indicators.

"Feminist studies all over reiterate that a truly political state of affairs operates between the two sexes to perpetuate a series of oppressive circumstances. As Kate Millet, in her essay – *Theory of Sexual Politics* – moots that politics has to refer to structured power relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another." (Hazarika 2008).

The present paper seeks to evaluate the 73rd Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution with a gender perspective based on various studies. It attempts to analyze the various aspects of reservation and its impact on the women empowerment process in the context of India.

Women and Politics Before 1947

During the British rule, several organizations campaigned and worked for social issues related to women such organizations aimed at uplifting the status of women in their everyday life. Gradually, the horizon of their activities enhanced and they became actively involved in the independence movement mostly as undercover helpers. However, they could not carve out any space for themselves in active politics. More often than not, they were pushed back as mute spectators only. All their talk for equality could not go much beyond seeking social reforms.

In her popular history of women's movement in India titled *History of Doing*, Radha Kumar articulates, "The estrangement of social reform from nationalism, which began towards the end of the nineteenth century, grew greater over the years, expressing itself in the form of a debate familiar to contemporary ears, over the relative importance of social and political issues and their interconnections. Within the debate, there were differences in the definitions of social reform and politics. On the one side loyalist social reformers felt that the field of social reform was divided by political allegiances and politics ought therefore to be eschewed; for the other, reform notwithstanding many felt that the social and political spheres were distinct but inseparable." (Kumar 2003).

Vir Bharat and Indrani Chatterjee have described how a discourse of equality began to develop in the late 1910s and 1920s, among women who had been active in nationalist campaigns. Not only did they link women's rights with nationalism, they used nationalist arguments to defend demands for women's rights (ibid.).

Panchayati Raj – A Gandhian Ideology

After independence, the Gandhian ideology of self-governance or *swaraj* based on an economy of self-reliance and self-sufficiency of villages was adopted. The village was considered the basic unit of administration. Gandhi's ideas of Panchayati Raj were based on the model of ancient village republics. Seeking democratic decentralization, the Indian Constitution directed the States to 'take steps to organize village panchayats ...to enable them to function as units of self-government.'

Panchayati Raj, which was launched in 1952, is acknowledged as "a real democratic political apparatus, which would bring the masses into active political participation and would establish a genuine political control from below." (Desai 2003). The main consideration that prompted this move was the need for ensuring public co-operation and participation in national construction and development (ibid.). All said and done, the Panchayati Raj did not make any headway in the development or the empowerment of the marginalized sections. Subsequently, Balwant Rai Mehta

Committee was set up in 1957 to evaluate the Panchayati Raj system. The Committee, which submitted its report in 1959, recommended a three-tier system of grassroots institutions from the village to district levels, which came into existence in 1992 and came to be known as 'Panchayati Raj'.

73rd Constitutional Amendment – A step forward towards Empowerment

Although Balwant Rai Mehta Committee did help in apparently decentralizing power, it did not take any step towards actual empowerment of the marginalized groups, especially women. The history of the demand for reservation for women in the political bodies dates back to pre-independence. Observes Buch (2000), "When India was under colonial rule, it was only the restricted male members who could vote and contest elections while women were totally absent from the political scene. For instance, the Bombay Village Panchayat Act 1920 categorically stipulated that no person could become an elected member who was a female and that the election was to be held in each village by the adult male residents at a meeting presided over by the assistant or deputy collector."

Even after independence, the Indian Constitution did not mention or specifically provide reservation for women's representation in the democratic political structures. This was made possible only through the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, which "provided much needed opportunity for women to actively participate in the decision making process of their locality through the political right that was conferred on them through the central Act." (Mathew 2003).

The 73rd Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution was introduced in 1992, which gave a new dimension to the process of women empowerment in India. It provided for the reservation of 33 per cent of seats for women, apart from those for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, in panchayats.

Contemporary Studies on Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

With the participation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions, studies have shown that there has occurred a positive change in their inter-personal as well as their relations with the outside world. However, the available empirical studies provide some antinomies that cannot be ignored. On the one hand, there are studies (Singh 2004; Hemlata 2003; Devi Prasad B. and Harnath S. 2004; Chaturvedi 2004; Sharma 2004; Patil 1999) that have revealed that the inhibitions around women's participation in public life are slowly diminishing and that many of these women have begun to work independently in the political field. It is noted that "Women's political empowerment through this constitutional amendment has exploded several myths, like the belief that they are passive and disinterested in political institutions; only the well-to-do, upper strata women will come through reservation; only the kin of the

powerful politicians will enter panchayats through political connectivity to keep the seats for them; and lastly and most importantly, women are only proxy – ‘namesake’ – members do not participate in the panchayats.” (Mathew 2003). Moreover, it has also been claimed that women who hold positions in local bodies maintain greater efficiency and transparency in the running of public affairs. The proactive participation of women of Karnataka and West Bengal are cases in point.

On the other hand, there are studies that shed light on the failure of the constitutional amendment. These studies hold that in societies such as ours, the conventional growth-oriented top-down development strategy seldom works productively and benefits hardly trickle down to the marginalized sections as blamed or expected. The reservation for women in local bodies has become a new institutional mechanism to continue the dominance of the male elite. In many cases, the male relatives of women panchas (head) become the real headmen. The proxy-rule of male relatives has certainly dented the progressive agenda of the new amendment (Narayanan 2003). “There are serious backlashes too from the male dominant patriarchal Indian society. Elected women have become the victims of exploitation, violence and harassment. There are stories from all over the country of violations of their rights despite constitutional provisions. Further, women belonging to traditionally marginalized groups remain the receiving end of upper caste atrocities, even after being given the space in a democratic process.” (Mathew 2003). Such cases only make a mockery of the democratic system.

Studies have also noticed that in times of conflict between the public and the private domain, women always give preference to the latter, and compromise with their role in the former. “Politics, in such a situation, is not just limited to the outer public domain, where women are disposed of rights of decision-making; instead, it concretizes its presence as an extension of home or the private domain.” (Abbott, Wallace and Tyler 2005).

As observed by Hazarika, in her study on the women panchayat members of Assam, “The primary obstacles, which make women weak planners and policy implementers in the local self-government, as mentioned by women themselves, are burden of household work, lack of family and community support, lack of financial support, lack of political consciousness, cultural barriers, educational poverty, and male domination in decision-making.” (Hazarika 2008). Further, she mentions, “The other vital area, which has proved to be a major hindrance to women’s participation, is the fear of social ostracism and entrenched socio-cultural values regarding women. There are cases where elected women had to face the most demeaning kind of character assassination and scandals. Odd working hour and close association with

male members make them easy prey to slander and sexual abuse.” (ibid.).

In the context of grassroots empowerment, Banerjee also believes that the success or failure of grassroots empowerment is to some extent related to the whole concept of the “sexual geography”. The probability of the success of the collective empowerment process, she asserts, is higher amongst the poor women in comparison to the middle class women. This is so, because the poor women’s livelihood occupations have never been restricted to the ‘private’ domain, whereas, “women from a somewhat higher family status, being more used to economic dependence on the family and some form of social seclusion, may find an identical approach more threatening/intimidating, at least initially.” (Banerjee 2008).

Conclusion

Providing reservations for women at the grassroots level of democratic bodies is certainly a positive act by the Indian government. Women have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources, by interacting with the officialdom, and most of all, by challenging men only because of the new constitutional provisions. Moreover, it has helped them to “affirm their identity as women with particular and shared experiences.” (Hazarika 2008). Since their authority rarely extends beyond the limits of their families, even within it, it is constricted by various socio-cultural norms of the society.

The implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has increased the participation of women in politics of their locality, although numerically only. This alone may not raise their status in the society or the family. For “women still face considerable handicaps in their involvement in politics, for example, inadequate education, burden of reproductive and productive roles, lack of self-confidence, and opposition of entrenched cultural and religious views.” (Hazarika 2008).

On the dichotomy of public-private domain, feminist theory argues that sexual equality could be enhanced by socializing men and women in both domestic as well as public spheres. Because “when men’s authority is invested along with women’s in the family and household, and the women embrace the wider community, the legitimacy of the power of both sexes is more nearly equal.” (Banerjee 2008). Thus, “the most important question is, as highlighted by Henkel and Stirrat (2001), not “how much” are people empowered but rather “for what” they are empowered.”

Further, “since participation and empowerment are means and ends to each other and promoting participation requires the dismantlement of existing power relations. The spaces for participation created from above through actions of government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or those the people create for themselves through movements alone may not guarantee voice, unless the

participation prevents the existing patterns of power from being reproduced. (Narayanan 2003).

Lastly, it is hoped that a time might come when would contest the elections not for the sake of their kith and kin, but for the cause of emancipation in the political as well as the social arenas. As Hazarika (2008), rightly, concludes: "Politics is a struggle not for authority alone, but for the power it entails to make changes."

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