

Women, Space and Capability Development : The Role of Elected Women Representatives

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Abstract : *The theme of women's participation in political space has acquired the central space in national discussion about political life of our country as women's participation is now considered instrumental in ending the exploitation, suppression, and exclusion of women from 'public' space. Women's political participation has taken up the central stage as it has become one of the most important indicators of inclusive politics . 73rd amendment to the constitution can be seen as the measure taken by the government to improve the visibility of women in political space for expanding and deepening participatory democracy in the country. Hence , the slogan 'power to the people' denotes to the paradigm shift in the country where traditionally politics has been a male bastion. The paper is an attempt to understand and explain how women in panchayats are trying to create some space and niche for themselves, not only by becoming visible but also by becoming vocal after the silence of centuries.*

Keywords : *Participatory Democracy, Visibility, political Space, Capability.*

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INTRODUCTION

The 73rd amendment to Indian constitution represents a turning point in the Indian history as well as in the evolution of Panchayati Raj Institutions-the local self governments. It represents a crucial juncture in the women's political empowerment as well as in the political history of the country. This amendment to the Indian constitution is a consequence of the process that began with the Article 40 of the constitution, with the vision to organize the village panchayats and empower them by granting them the necessary power to act as units of self government. This initiation at the legislative and executive level created the Panchayat system throughout the country in the compliance of the directive principle of Article 40. Although this amendment created Panchayat system in different states of India to decentralize power and to create space for women in the panchayats so as to ensure active participation of the other half of the population of society. It envisaged that the population that was 'invisible' and 'silent' could henceforth become 'visible' and 'vocal'. Through this amendment, the constitution created space for the political representation of women using the mechanism of reservation. It ensured a minimum of 33 percent reservation of seats on the basis of rotation of constituencies every five years.

Panchayats refer to the institutional framework which embody the concept of democratic decentralization in the context of rural India. Traditional village panchayats are claimed to have been in existence since time immemorial. The term 'Panchayat' owes its origin to 'Panch' a council of five village elders, vested with the powers and the authority to resolve the disputes in rural society. It is however, quite difficult to pinpoint how old this traditional panchayat system was. There are many references to the panchayats in history and literature of India. It may be traced back to the ancient times, as there are many references to the existence of Sabhas in vedic literature. Malviya (1956) has referred to the mention of panchayats in Ancient Indian Scriptures i.e. the Puranas and the Vedas. Nehru has also extended the description of the Panchayats and has written about the existence of traditional and virtuous village panchayats.

The British rule imposed a wide range of changes in the panchayats, to the extent that the system of local self government ceased to exist in the villages. It is apparent that when the Indian establishment was brought under the direct rule of the Crown, 'much of the work that was for ages associated with village panchayats.....was being transferred to external official agencies'. This included

the construction and maintenance of irrigation works, the roads, relief distribution during famine, payments of grant-in-aid to schools, the regulation of the villagers' right to cut fuel or graze their cattle in the forest, and so on. But prior to their integration within the British system of administration, the panchayats were a part and parcel of the self contained village committees. Sir Charles Metcalfe has described these traditional panchayats as 'the little republics'. These republics, however were not democratic in their structure, nature and orientation. The successors of Sir Metcalfe, Lord Mayo (1870) and Lord Rippon (1882) initiated steps to reorient local self governments by introducing structural changes during their tenure. Therefore, the first dent in the direction of decentralization was also made during the British rule. Another prominent figure who laid major stress on the concept of local self government was the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, who during the freedom struggle tried to evolve a wholistic concept of the local self governance (panchayats) by reviving them with his own idea of Gram Swarajya.

The problems, challenges and the most eminent question before contemporary Indian society is whether the space allocated to women in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs hereafter) will create a critical mass that can alter the position, status and standing of women in society. Will this change enable them so that they can lead their life with dignity and can exercise and exert their rights over the space allocated to them to develop their capabilities without any prejudices. This public space has been male dominated for centuries.

This paper's aim is to understand the position of women in Indian society in general and Elected Women Representatives (EWRs hereafter) in PRIs in particular, to analyse whether and how they have developed their capabilities to exercise the power allocated to them, to help and empower other women. This paper tries to investigate the socio-political conditions, factors and capabilities that aid the EWRs in working effectively. A purposive sample of 36 EWRs from Moradabad district was taken for the analysis after the panchayat election in 2015. Quantitative as well as qualitative data was used for the purpose of analysis.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- (1) What is the social and political background of EWRs ?
- (2) How do these candidates get nominated and conduct their election campaign?
- (3) Do they make any significant contribution in the decision making process?

(4) How does the social and political opportunity given to the EWRs enhance their capabilities ?

DISCUSSION

ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN PRIs

One of the objective of this study was to evaluate the capabilities of EWRs to determine whether they are able to create some space in de facto to exercise the authority and power to change and challenge the existing equation. This paper is an effort in this direction .

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND:

The EWRs in sample were mostly (75 percent) from the land owning families in general and OBC categories whereas EWRs from SC category were from poor families. A total of 42 percent OBC and general EWRs contested the election for the first time who came from a non-political family background. Among the SC category, 25 percent EWRs were contesting the election for the second time and rest were the first timers and did not have any political background. Among the OBC category 80 percent belonged to the muslim community. All the EWRs were in 35-55 age group.

AWARENESS OF EWRs REGARDING NOMINATION AND CAMPAIGNING

As political space is stereotypically considered a male bastion and women, traditionally were confined within the four walls of home. This gendered division of space has been a major obstacle that naturally and spontaneously prevents women from getting exposure in public life and leaves them enveloped within a charade of shelter and safety. They thereby remain uninformed about the rules, regulations, procedures and problems of public life. Very few (23 percent) EWRs were found to be aware of the proper election procedures. Data computed on the basis of caste clearly explains that EWRs belonging to scheduled caste category were least aware regarding the procedures of election, especially those who were contesting the election for the first time. In this category itself, the level of awareness of the EWRs belonging to politically active families was equally dismal as the males of their family took over all the paperwork and conducted all the formalities on their behalf which were required to fulfill the job of EWRs, hence they remained unaware as well as ill-informed about the election procedures. Among the backward caste category only 19 percent EWRs were found to be aware about the process. As a result, amongst the 36 EWRs who formed the sample space of the study,

majority of EWRs needed the assistance of the male members of their family to fill the nomination forms and in filing of nomination.

Next step to succeeding in a successful nomination is the campaigning and electioneering in order to influence the voters of the constituency. The data revealed differential outcomes regarding the participation of EWRs in the electoral campaigns. The results clearly substantiated and reaffirmed the patriarchal bias and tokenism as there were many EWRs (32 percent) who did not even step out of their homes for public contact and campaigning. The posters used for campaigning and propaganda did not even contain the photograph of the contesting women, instead it displayed the photo of father or brother if unmarried and of the father-in-law or husband if they were married. A miniscule number (15 percent) of contesting women went alone for electioneering, most of the candidates (53 percent) who went for canvassing were always accompanied by their father, brother, husband or some other male relative. Hence, it can be concluded that in most of the cases campaigning was managed and directed by the male folks of the family

CONTRIBUTION IN DECISION-MAKING

Traditionally in the Indian society, decision making was the male domain, it was taken for granted that the men will have the final say in all important decisions. An attempt has been made to assess the role of EWRs in decision making in public space and their influence with the responses obtained from them. Most of the new entrants (70 percent) lacked the procedural knowledge and education to have a say in the decision making as they were not assertive enough to exercise their prudence and the male members of family worked as a proxy for them. EWRs belonging to general and OBC category also confided that the decisions were taken without their consent as ‘they still do not have enough space in the private domestic power structure and acquiring of a space of their own in public decision making is a very difficult thing.’ (Mahipal, 1998). Extensive analysis of qualitative data showed that some of the EWRs were keen to discharge their responsibilities in accordance of their capabilities but due to their lower educational qualifications they did not feel equipped and confident to put their viewpoint forward. There were only a few cases where EWRs could overcome and resist the caste equation in decision making.

CAPABILITY ENHANCEMENT

The 73rd amendment has not only changed the face of PRIs but has altered their spirit as well. It has given the command of leadership in the hands of women where they can govern by assuming power and leadership. Earlier most of the

villages were governed, dominated and ruled by the powerful (male, dominant caste and politically active families), but now there are at least some examples to quote where members of weaker and marginalized groups, specially women who took hold of and changed the situation. More than 50 percent EWRs felt positively about the situation as they felt that their role had changed in public space. 23 percent accepted that now they had their own identity and felt empowered to ask questions. 19 percent reported that their level of confidence had risen immensely and decision making had become easier as they did not feel the need to consult males of the family every time. 8 percent confided that they felt empowered and happy as they received exposure and knowledge of the outside world. The EWRs belonging to the deprived class of society expressed their enthusiasm and exhibited a positive attitude as they saw it as an opportunity to realize and enhance the capabilities of women in general and theirs in particular.

CONCLUSION

The 73rd constitutional amendment has provided necessary conditions to bring a breeze of change to make PRIs vibrant. It has definitely helped panchayats in challenging the traditional patriarchal power structure by providing a minimum 33 percent reservation for women. The entire process of capability enhancement and space creation depends on many factors of which panchayati raj is one. Women have been the victims of patriarchy, subjugation, deprivation and marginalization. Political participation along with space enhancement and capability development can remove the obstacles of participatory democracy. Power is an ability (capability) to make choices. This amendment has conferred some power and choices in women's life. By using this constitutional provision along with their organizational skills and collective strength EWRs may acquire new capabilities, create more space for themselves in public and exercise their de jure power to bring women in mainstream from the margins.

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