

SOCIETY'S PERCEPTION OF PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS (PRI)

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Abstract

The Panchayati Raj System of rural local self-government has deep roots in the Indian rural society. Descriptions of the existence of 'Gram Sangh', 'Rural Communities', 'Village Councils' and 'Local Self Government' can be traced to Dharmashastras and Upnishads. After independence, Article 40 of the Constitution of India laid down in the Directive Principles of State Policy that the State shall take steps to constitute the 'Village Panchayat'. However, the representation of women in the 'Village Panchayat' remained negligible. In view of this, the Government of India reserved one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions for women, by implementing the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1993. The amendment opened the doors for the participation of women in rural politics and administration. The Act, therefore, challenged the traditional Indian rural society's perception of the participation of women in PRI, traditionally defined as a domain for men. In the present endeavor, an attempt has been made to understand the changes in the Indian rural society's perception of participation of women in PRI. It has been noted that the society's perception of women's participation has been changing a little bit due to several reasons. Although the percentage of women representatives has outnumbered the quota of reservation, e.g., recently in the 2021 elections of PRI in the U.P., their actual participation in the decision-making process is an important issue for empirical research. To inculcate the values of gender equality in the perception of society, the masses need to be sensitized. Men and women, equally and collectively, form the society.

Keywords

Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), Patriarchal Society, Gender Stereotyping, Gender Discrimination, Empowerment)

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The perception of rural society plays a significant role in the empowerment of rural women. In Indian traditional ethos, rural women have been prohibited from participation in rural politics and administration. Their place of work has been confined to the four walls of the homes. Women suffer discrimination in all walks of life, including social, educational, economic, political, and administrative. Traditionally, in the rural society, the status of women has been subservient to men. Women have been subjugated and oppressed in society and at home. It is said that women have been subjected to gender discrimination from womb to tomb. "Women's subordination is not only due to male domination but also due to the basic economic and political structure of society, which are again reinforced by the same male domination" (Desai and Thakkar, 2001: 150).

Patriarchal Society

In the United Nations' report on gender discrimination, it has been mentioned: "Sex stereotyping, possibly the most effective propaganda instrument of the patriarchal status quo, is among the most entrenched obstacles to the elimination of discrimination and is largely responsible for the denigration of the role and potential of the women in society. Traditional male/ female roles have been deeply ingrained and glorified in language education, the mass media, advertising, and the arts to such an extent that even women have become desensitized to their own inferior portrayal. It should hardly be surprising then that society's perceptions of women are for the most part negative. At best, women are perceived as mothers and 'angels at the heart', their professional and other capabilities going virtually unnoticed. Often, they are considered no more than housewives or dispensable sex objects" (United Nations Report, 1990: 90). Indian rural patriarchal society provides an example of gender discrimination as mentioned in the above report. Since her birth, the socialization of girls is focused to prepare her only for the household activities and all the norms and values of patriarchal society are inculcated.

It is said that women in their childhood are under the protection of their father, after marriage under the protection of their husband, and at old age under the protection of their son. Women have not been allowed to participate in the decision-making within the family, and her voice was never given due significance in the society. The status of rural women in socio-economic and political structures has been inferior to men. The Constitution of India talks about the equality of men and women; however, women are yet to be accorded equal status by the society (Sanchita Tripathi, 2005: 13). In the patriarchal mindset, men are perceived as superior to women, physically as well as mentally. In the idiom, '*Jar Joru and Jamin*', women have been included as the property of men.

Gender Stereotyping

Gender stereotyping can be seen in every culture and society, and it is a major reason for gender discrimination. Indian society is no exception to it. Defining the concept of gender stereotyping, the report of United Nations on human rights (2013) mentions: “A gender stereotype is a generalized view or perception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by, women and men. A gender stereotype is harmful when it limits women’s and men’s capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers, and/or make choices about their lives. Whether overtly hostile (such as ‘women are irrational’) or seemingly benign (‘women are nurturing’), harmful stereotypes perpetuate inequalities” (<https://www.ohchr.org>). One may find several examples of gender stereotypes in the Indian society which discriminate against women. Without breaking the shackles of such stereotypes, gender equality cannot be ensured.

“Women’s duties as good daughters, good wives, and good mothers are well defined in the Indian patriarchal society. Wifhood and motherhood are accepted as pivotal roles for women: by implication, these roles are complete in themselves, and women need not pursue any specialized discipline of knowledge, art, or profession. The good woman is, sweet, loving, caring, and ever sacrificing. The mainstream concept of the role of the women seems to be best described in Sanskrit couplet: She (in relation to her husband) is like a mother while cooking and serving food, secretary while he is working, servant at his feet, a courtesan in his bed and earthlike in forbearance” (Desai and Thakkar, 2001: 1). In rural traditions, women were supposed to stay confined to the four walls of the house and perform their household duties. Any movement outside the household was restricted, very limited, and mostly allowed when accompanied by male family members. However, now one may observe a change in this attitude, and women are moving out of the house for education, employment, and for other purposes.

Kinship Tradition of Avoidance

The tradition of ‘Avoidance’ in the kinship system of Hindu religion in Indian society has prescribed to maintain distance between men and women in several relationships. Through socialization, these values are inculcated among both men and women.

Politics as Men’s Domain

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, acknowledged the equal importance of women’s participation in the freedom struggle of India. He advocated for equal opportunities for both men and women in all spheres of life. Quoting

Nehru, Vasant Desai writes: "In political life, everyone has equal opportunities, in our panchayats also, everyone should be considered equal. There should be no distinction between men and women" (Desai, 1990: 335). In independent India, the participation of women in politics at all levels has always been a concern for policymakers. Reservation of seats for women at local, state, and national levels in political institutions has been demanded and debated in the Parliament and many external forums. In every election, it becomes an issue of concern that on how many seats have women candidates been selected by political parties. A demand to increase their representation is made. However, women's participation continues to be very small in comparison to their share in the total population. However, change in the social perception of women's capabilities is visible in the political and administrative spheres, and we find them occupying positions of responsibilities at different levels like, Speaker of the House in the Parliament, Governors, Chief Ministers, Ministers and Head of the Political Parties.

Empowerment Through Reservation for Women in PRI

Empowerment has been defined in Webster's New World Dictionary (1892) as a process by which power is gained, developed, seized, facilitated, or given. Empowerment of rural women, therefore, entails her movement to the positions of power in PRI. Empowerment is not a product that can be given to someone, but it is a process in which efforts for seizing, sharing, and exercising the power, are to be made voluntarily.

The Government of India has reserved one-third of the seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) by implementing the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1993. The Act defined PRI as a political institution and allowed political parties to participate in the election process. The Act reserved one-third of the seats in Panchayats for women (<https://www.panchayat.gov.in>). The objective of the reservation of seats for women was to ensure their participation in the development of rural society, which was negligible due to several reasons. Reservation aimed at the empowerment of rural women. Reservation for women is also a step towards the goal of inclusive development. Through reservation, the Government has given an opportunity to women to develop their capabilities of administration, build a society of their own dreams, and to focus on the redressal of women's problems. Reservation for women in PRI, therefore, has changed the perception of society towards women, who will now be playing a crucial role in the rural administration. The reservation for women in PRI provides them an opportunity to participate in the development of rural society.

Women Representatives Exceeded the One-Third Quota of Reservation in 2021 Elections of PRI in Uttar Pradesh

The winning women candidates outnumber men on key posts, ranging from the village head to the district panchayat chief, in the recently concluded Panchayat elections of 2021 in Uttar Pradesh. According to official sources, 31,212 women were elected for Gram Pradhan, 447 for Block Pramukh, and 42 for the post of District Panchayat Chairperson exceeding the quota of one-third seats allocated for them (<https://www.indiatvnews.com>). The results of the recently concluded elections of PRI in Uttar Pradesh may, therefore, be considered as a welcome development/indicator towards empowerment of rural women. It is a reality that before the reservation, participation of women in PRI was negligible. Without reservation, it was difficult for rural women to share power with men in PRI.

However, despite reservation for women in PRI since 1993, the perception of rural men towards women has changed very little. In patriarchal Indian rural society, all decisions are still made by the male family head, and even today women cannot contest elections without his consent. The support and consent of the male members are necessary to contest the election of PRI. Rural women cannot think of any type of participation in PRI without the consent of men. In the majority of the cases, women participate in PRI at the behest of a male family member. Seldom will one find a woman willing to participate in PRI on their own.

It may be observed that most of the rural men still don't favor the participation of women in politics. However, families enjoying power in rural societies do not want to lose their power in the villages due to the reservation of seats for women, and therefore, they seek to control the PRI through their women's family members. In this scenario, due to the compulsion of reservation, men now attempt to grab the power in PRI through female members of the family. If they do not allow their women members of the family to contest in the elections of PRI, they will lose power and hold in PRI. There is no other option for rural men to stay in power. In PRI elections, it is a common feature that one may find female candidates' canvassing posters without their photographs, but instead with the photographs of male family members, mostly their husband or father. Such canvassing posters depict the patriarchal mindset. On most occasions, rural women participate in PRI elections only when supported by male family members (Vijay Agnew, 1979). However, men's attitude towards the participation of women in PRI has also changed a bit (Manikyamba, 1989).

The majority of the rural men still do not agree with the idea of reservation for women in PRI. The empirical observations have shown that, most of the rural

men perceive that thirty-three percent reservation of seats for women is much higher and that it should be reduced. Men allow women to contest elections with the assumptions of their being only 'proxy' and their husbands being 'Sarpanch Pati' or 'Pradhan Pati' (Mukesh Sharma, 2002: 133). Women are allowed to participate in PRI, but with the doubts and comments like 'Who will make the chapatis?' and 'So long as you mind the kid'.

It may be assumed, therefore, that to an extent, the participation of women in PRI has been accepted by men, because they do not want to lose their power in PRI and therefore, use women as proxies. Representation of women is just mere tokenism. It is the men who still do drive from the backseats in Panchayats and that is why a new term 'Pradhan Pati' has come to be used. It has been reported that sometimes, even in the oath-taking ceremony, the 'Pradhan Pati' reached to take the oath instead of the woman Pradhan. One may observe the Pradhan Pati doing most of the duties and enjoying the rights of the woman Pradhan, who may be his wife or daughter. Therefore, power still lies with men. "Ultimately, men may tend to monopolize the political space as being done hitherto and women representatives following blindly the terms dictated by their husbands, male relatives, friends and leaders of political parties" (Seema Singh, 2003: 153).

Arguments Against Participation of Women in PRI

Several arguments have been made against the participation of women in rural politics. Political activities in India are not considered suitable for women due to several reasons viz., concurrent violence, corrupt practices, domination of men, biological characteristics of women, patriarchal traditions, educational backwardness, and financial dependence of rural women, etc. The often-quoted argument against the participation of women in political activities is, that their conventional work is to cook and upbringing of children at home. If women will move out of their homes, the household work will suffer. Moreover, women being physically and emotionally weak, should not participate in the male-dominated sphere of politics. Contesting election entails long hours of canvassing, thus moving out of the household will result in the disruption of work at home. Moreover, without the accompanying male members of the family, it will not be possible for woman to move out of her house for campaigning.

Women's participation in politics is allowed in limited political spheres, viz. voting, as it does not require much time and therefore, no disturbance to the household activities. However, in voting too, women vote according to the dictates of the male family members. Therefore, the voting rights of women in Indian society have been limited due to the influence of male family members. This situation raises

a question mark on their actual participation even in voting. Women have also been used for canvassing in elections for family members, to attract women, voters. It may be observed that men have used women for their own vested political interest by using them as voters, canvassers, and even as candidates.

Conclusion

In view of the above, it may be concluded that even after the reservation for women in PRI, the situation has still not changed much. Although the percentage of women representatives has outnumbered the quota of reservation, e.g., recently in the 2021 elections of PRI in the U.P., their actual participation in the decision-making process is an important issue for empirical research. The following questions need to be examined: To what extent are women in the driving seat? Are men still the back seat drivers in the decision-making? Are women representatives still working as proxies? To what extent has the perception of society changed towards the participation of women in PRI? It may be assumed that with the improving education among women, their awareness of their political and administrative rights will improve. Barely reserving seats for women in PRI will not serve the purpose of including the excluded section of the society in the rural society's developmental activities. Moreover, in most of the instances, women themselves are not coming forward to exercise their rights in the functioning of PRI. Several reasons have been attributed to this viz. lack of education, awareness, economic dependence, values inculcated in socialization, and even personal convenience. To bring substantive change in the perception of society on the participation of women, the masses should be sensitized to gender equality. Men and women, equally and collectively, form the society.

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