

Empowerment of Women through Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: *Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It involves the building up of a society wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. Political participation of women can be viewed as one of the proven strategies for the empowerment of women. Panchayat being the nearest form of government to the people can play instrumental role in their empowerment by ensuring effective participation of them. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment ushered in a major change in the history of Panchayats making provision for the reservation of women. But a number of studies have proved that reservation alone cannot ensure participation of women in political decision making process leading towards their empowerment. Though it has made a positive impact but still there is long way to go. A concerted effort from multiple government and non-government actors including CSOs and media has to be made by adopting multi-pronged strategies to achieve that goal. This paper has made an attempt to analyse the concept of empowerment, how to measure it, strategies for empowerment of women and assess the role of Panchayats in participation as well as empowerment of women and also suggest some effective measures to achieve that goal. The study is based on secondary data collected from different sources like study reports, government reports, books, journals and web based materials.*

Keywords: Elected Women Representatives, Empowerment, EWR, Panchayats, Participation, PRIs.

Introduction:

Women constitute almost half of the total population of the country. Besides bearing and rearing of future citizens, they play equal role like men in every walk of life. Yet they enjoy only secondary social status and their participation in the development process is marginalized. In India, as per 2011 census, women account for 586 million and represent 48.46% of the total population. Thus without effective participation of this 'aadhi abadi', the development of the country cannot be ensured effectively. And for their effective participation, effort should be in place to improve their socio-economic condition simultaneously. Women's empowerment is seen as pillar of holistic approach towards establishing new patterns and process of development. Empowerment of women should be a key aspect of all social development programmes (World Bank, 2002). The women are both the agent and the target of development process.

Empowerment of women would literally mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able

to participate in development activities (Suchinmayee, 2008). The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making. Panchayat, the local government system in India, being the nearest form of governance to the people can be viewed as a suitable platform for encouraging participation of women. It provides them with the opportunity to take part in the decision making process leading towards their empowerment.

Methodology:

The present paper is based on the data collected from the secondary source i.e. published literature of the subject concern, reports and web materials. The secondary source of data has been further analysed for drawing inferences on the level of participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, changes in nature of participation over the years and extent of their empowerment based on different parameters.

Women Empowerment - The Concept:

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept and relates to the social attainment, economical participation and political participation. Further,

empowerment is an ongoing process and cannot be achieved in an absolute sense. It is a relative concept and varies according to the specific situations. So, it has always been very challenging in defining or measuring empowerment. It has been defined by various authors from different perspectives. Amartya Sen defined empowerment as the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources (physical, human, intellectual and financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes) (Sen and Batliwala, 2000). They also elaborated that it leads to a growing intrinsic capability, greater self-confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barrier.

Some authors have described empowerment as a process and divided it into key components like, enabling factors/parameters, agency and outcomes for comprehensive understanding. Some define empowerment as a process of awareness and conscientization, of capacity building leading to greater participation, effective decision-making power and control leading to transformative action (Karl, 1995). Women empowerment is defined as a change in the context of a woman's life, which enables her increased capacity for leading a fulfilling human life. It gets reflected both in external qualities (viz. health, mobility, education and awareness, status in the family, participation in decision making, and also at the level of material security) and internal qualities (viz. self-awareness and self-confidence) (Mathew, 2003). A more comprehensive definition states that empowerment of women is construed as providing them with a sufficient degree of control, to give them decision-making powers to enable them to raise the level of consciousness of their class and enhance their status and rightful entitlements (Jartha, 2007).

Measuring Women Empowerment:

Since empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept and it is viewed as a process as well as an outcome, it is very difficult to measure empowerment of women in any country or society. Many attempts have been made by scholars to develop conceptual framework to measure women's empowerment but most of them are at household level. It is found to be difficult to have any macro level framework. One big attempt has been made by UNDP in the Human Development Report, 1995 (UNDP, 1995). Two indices, namely, Gender related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) were introduced to bring out the facts and figures relating to deprivation of women. While GDI measures the achievements in the same dimensions and variables as the HDI, it also takes into account inequality in achievement between women and men (Anand and Sen, 1995). The greater the gender disparity in human development, the lower is country's GDI compared to its HDI.

On the other hand, GEM indicates whether women are able to actively participate in economic and political life. GEM considers three variables that reflect women's participation in society – political power or decision-making, education and health. The GDI and GEM faced much criticism for their methodological and conceptual limitations.

UNDP again introduced Gender Inequality Index (GII) in the Human Development Report, 2010 which is the latest one and it superseded the previous two indices. The GII measures gender inequalities in three important aspects of human development—reproductive health measured by maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rates; empowerment, measured by proportion of parliamentary seats occupied by females and proportion of adult females and males aged 25 years and older with at least some secondary education; and economic status expressed as labour market participation and measured by labour force participation rate of female and male populations aged 15 years and older. As per Human Development Report, 2013 though India ranks 127 (value: 0.563) out of 187 countries in GII (UNDP, 2013).

World Economic Forum introduced its first Global Gender Gap Index in 2006 as a framework for capturing the magnitude of gender-based disparities and tracking their progress. This index captures parameters of women's empowerment from a little different perspective which is rather more comprehensive. This composite index considers four parameters, namely, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. India's overall rank is 108 (Score: 0.664) out of 145 countries in its Global Gender Gap Report, 2015 released recently on 18th November 2015.

Approaches to Empowerment of Women:

Women as an independent group constitute almost 49% of the country's total population as per the 2011 Census. The importance of women as an important human resource was recognized by the Constitution of India which not only accorded equality to women but also empowered the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in their favours. A number of Articles of the Constitution specially reiterated the commitment of the constitution towards the socio economic development of women and upholding their political right and participation in decision making.

The Government of India introduced the National Policy for Empowerment of Women in 2001. It has set its goal in bringing about advancement, development and empowerment of women in all spheres of life through creation of a more responsive judicial and legal system sensitive to women and mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process. Efforts have been made over the years to empower women socially,

economically as well as politically but, as a result of the lack of synergy or coordination between these activities, the outcomes have never been satisfactory.

Broadly there may be two ways for bringing about gender equality and women empowerment — (a) through inducting women in the mainstream of development and assuring their access to productive assets and (b) through legislation for ensuring them equal social and political status and assuring their participation in political decision making. However in both the strategies providing education is the crucial link which holds the key.

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Empowerment as a process involves development of women from social, political, economic and legal aspects. It includes building up of a society wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension and discrimination. From economic aspect it includes overall economic development through participation of women in economic activities, and through ownership, access and control of women over economic resources. From legal point of view, legislation should be in place to protect the women from all forms of discrimination and violence and ensure ownership of productive assets. Advocates for the empowerment of women around the world prescribe participation of women in political decision making as a major therapy.

Role of Panchayat in Empowerment of Women:

The concept of decentralized local governance is not very new in India. The existence of Panchayat dates back to Vedic age. It existed throughout the history during Mughal or British regime. Post-independence India makes provision for setting up local governance or Panchayat under Article 40 of the Constitution of India. Recommendation of the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) enabled to introduce three tier more or less uniform structures of Panchayati Raj Institutions across the country. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments set the milestone in the history of Panchayat by making 1/3rd reservation of seats for women thus creating space for women in political participation and decision making at the grass root level. PRIs have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73rd Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantage section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women.

Providing representation to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions through legislation can be viewed as an instrumentalist approach leading towards empowerment of women. Though legislation can

ensure their representation in the forum but cannot ensure true participation in the decision making or development process. Present day Panchayat in India is mostly criticised by the proxy participation of women, elite capture in decision making and influence of power brokers in implementation of development projects. When any seat is reserved for women, generally local level male political leaders place their wives, sisters or relatives as the candidate. Obviously, when they are elected in the said position, they work under the clutches of male counterparts. Until and unless they are not allowed to work independently without any remote control behind the screen, leadership will not emerge. The male dominated structure of the society is the stumbling block on the way towards empowerment of women.

Panchayat, on the other hand, being the local level government nearest to the people, can be viewed as the breeding ground for women leaders. It can provide them ample opportunity to experiment their self-confidence and gain hands-on experience. This platform enables them to take part directly in the decision making in the process of development. Since the PRIs have potential to start the process of women empowerment from the village level, it can change the social scenario of the village.

Findings from the Studies:

Since empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept, it is very difficult to develop any composite scale for measuring empowerment. A number of studies have been conducted in India to measure empowerment of women but most of them are at household level. There are very few research studies which aimed at measuring empowerment of women at macro-level. Two such studies are widely accepted - State Gender Development Report (2005), by National Productivity Council (NPC), New Delhi and the report "Gendering Human Development Indices: Recasting the Gender Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure for India" (2009) by Ministry of Women and Child Development (GoI).

There is a limited number of studies which assessed the role or effectiveness of Panchayat in empowerment of women. Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) conducted a comprehensive study on Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in 2008 covering 15 States which had focus on participation of women. Though participation in terms of representations of women is a major parameter to measure empowerment of women through this system, but giving maximum weightage to this parameter may bring superfluous result in the study. Other parameters like participation in the meetings, decision makings, their role in plan implementation, outcomes of the work of Panchayats in terms of gender development etc. should also be taken into account with due weightage.

MoPR commissioned another survey by AC Nielsen-ORG Marg in 2009 covering 1368 Gram Panchayats, 228 blocks and 114 districts from 23 States which is the largest ever survey in the country. This study sought to assess the quality of participation of EWRs in PRIs against the polarized earlier studies - tokenism and surrogates vs. celebration of only success stories. It looked at, among others, the developmental outcomes of women Panchayat leaders and whether their leadership has had any impact on the implementation and performance of development activities besides mapping their socio-economic profile, political career, quality of participants and empowerment.

Participation in terms of representation has been ensured at least 33% in all states. It has resulted into participation of 1.26 million women, who constitute 44.52 per cent of the total number of elected representatives in present day Panchayat (Alok, 2011). Representation of women in unreserved seats is a most important indicator to measure the success of reservation introduced through 73rd constitutional amendment. MoPR Study (2008) shows that there are about 6% EWRs who are elected from unreserved seats (SoPR, 2008-09). This indicator has huge significance to assess the actual participation of women as well as empowerment. In most of the cases, women are not projected as a candidate when there is no reservation. This figure reflects the trend of political participation of women spontaneously. The same survey has proved that the provision of reservations had played a determining role. The majority of the elected representatives had contested only one election and hence the proportion of first timers in politics was as high as 86 per cent.

A study of the EWRs in the first Panchayat elections in three States of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh (with a sample of 1200) had noted that 97 per cent of women and 85 per cent of men had never been in Panchayats

earlier. Most of the women also stated that it was because of the reservation they were in the position; otherwise it would not have been possible. This finding obviously underscores the role of reservation in laying the ground for women leadership in grass root level government. It is needless to mention that the process is expected to lead towards empowerment of women. The study also highlights the changes of role of women leaders over time which is very encouraging. It mentioned about the emerging leadership in grass root politics. Data from the study reflects changes in perceptions, recognition, respect, enhanced status, confidence levels, increased political aspirations and community's perceptions which the author identified as markers of emerging leadership and obviously empowerment of women (Buch, 2010).

MoPR study (2009) reflects that nearly three-fourths of the EWRs in the sample belonged to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and OBC categories, and were evenly divided above and below the poverty line. This study again reveals that reservation has played a significant role as four-fifths of all the representatives got elected from reserved seats. In addition to this, interestingly, this study shows that 60 percent EWRs reported no gender discrimination and 94 percent reported their acceptability in Panchayat meetings as well as raising issues freely. Entry of more number of women in political system at local level has created enabling environment for the participation of common women citizens in various activities like attending Gram Sabha meeting (68-78 percent). Around 14 percent were re-elected more than once at the gram Panchayat level which is considered to be an important outcome of reservation. However, issues related to the planning for rural development works and identification of BPL families were discussed mainly by the male elected representatives. Following tables show the changes in crucial parameters and reflect level of empowerment of women.

Table I: Comparison of change experienced by SC & ST and all women representative

<i>Empowering changes after election</i>	<i>% SC/ST*</i>	<i>% All EWRs**</i>
Internal reason for poor participation – proxy status, fear, low self-confidence, knowledge, compliance to traditional caste and gender roles	72	22.9
Greater self-confidence	55	78
Increased leadership skills	31	69.8
Family share responsibility for looking after children	39.8	62.4
More role allowed in family decision making	39.8	68-75
More respected after the election	58.4	79
		65
Able to speak up in their households and Gram Sabha more Freely	34.3	67.9
Greater self-esteem exhibited by SC/ST representatives	32.5	77.1
Officials accepted invitation to visit Panchayat	39.3	43.1
Officials supported in implementing schemes	36.8	40.8
Officials took prompt action on women requests/complaints	34.2	40.8

*Data on SC/ST women representatives from Mangubhai et al. 2009, ** Data on All EWRs from the EWR Report (MoPR 2009)

Table II: Comparative involvement of women SC/ST representatives and all EWRs

Aspects of Involvement	% SC/ST women*	% All EWRs**
President / Sarpanch / Pradhan		
Able to work / discharge the official responsibilities with freedom and independence	Only one third of total 119 presidents surveyed	
Attended Panchayat meeting during their term	52.4	
Called Panchayat meeting	35.3	86
		93.6
Chaired Panchayat meeting	31.9	93.6
Voluntarily signed resolutions	27.7	34.4
Played significant role in the distribution of development schemes	18.5	55.9
Vocal in raising issues	26	94.1
Raised issue in Panchayat meeting	52.2	94.1
Issues discussed/ considered	"Few times"	79.7

*From Mangubhai et al 2009, **from EWR Report 2009

MoPR Study (2009) further noted that one-third of EWRs report interactions with the police, local bureaucracy and officials in the line departments to discuss scheme and participation in elections campaigns. Around 24-35 percent of EWRs mentioned that they were taking proactive initiatives in signing petitions, participating in protests, alerting media or notifying police / court about local problems. From the study it is quite clear that now majority of EWRs are no more proxy of their male relative patrons. Moreover, 58 percent of EWRs are now taking their own decisions to contest elections which can be considered as sea change in the entire gamut.

Results from the nationwide survey of women's participation in Panchayats suggest that a majority of the EWRs report an enhancement in their personal effectiveness and image after being elected. It has reduced their responsibilities at household level. Other family members are taking more responsibilities in their shoulders in terms of managing domestic chores. There are many instances of EWR of the Panchayat taking a keen interest and playing a significant role in the workings of grassroots politics. A change is becoming visible in prioritizing developmental activities of the Panchayats. Women are giving more priority on the activities which directly or indirectly affect their life or which have more important roles in addressing social issues from gender perspective.

A study of Karnataka (Kudva, 2003) reveals that in Karnataka, the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions has seen mixed results. It has made women more visible, decreased the levels of corruption in PRIs, and increased self-efficiency of women representatives. According to her, gender quota is a crucial component of strategies that seek to empower women through increased participation in the political system. All the women who participated in the election or in the election process are getting empowered.

National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) conducted a study which corroborated the findings of the existing studies. This study used four parameters for identification of indicators - participation in Gram Sabha meetings, labour market participation, and autonomy in terms of reproductive choice and independence in the management of financial resources. The study shows that the reservations for women results in a significant reduction of the incidence of problems with delivery for a wide range of public goods. The quality of service provision does not necessarily improve but the policy has led to an increase in the extent and nature of political participation, ability to hold leaders to account and possibly as a result individuals' willingness to contribute to public goods. The study also suggests that, although political reservations may impose both short term benefits and short term costs, they can yield overall social benefits, with political participation being a key channel through which these benefits materialize.

A study of the seven districts in Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh by Indian Social Institute used 5 key empowerment variables – Gender Equality, Social Equality, Decision Making Ability, Financial Autonomy and Personality Development. While gender equality had nineteen (19) distinct questions related to empowerment – four (4) child-related concerns and five (5) each for domestic workload, social practices, and marriage & family life issues; social equality had four (4), decision making had five (5), financial autonomy had four (4), and personality development had eight (8) distinct questions related to women empowerment. Altogether 40 questions were used to measure women empowerment in the study region. Each question had a ranking of 1 to 5. The score value of the respondents to consider their perception on women empowerment in rural Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh was - 40 to 94 (low empowerment level), 95 to 147 (moderate

empowerment level), and 148 to 200 (high empowerment level).

As shown in Table III, the majority of the respondents (63.1%) reported low women empowerment level, while the rest, 36.6 and 0.3 percent, reported medium and high women empowerment level, respectively. As compared to 68.3 percent of the interviewed Pradhans, only 61.4 percent of the Ward Members thought that women empowerment was low. An analysis of the gender

differences vis-à-vis women empowerment shows that male respondents perceived women to be slightly less empowered than their female counterparts. The proportion of male respondents who perceived low women empowerment level was 60 percent, in comparison to 64.5 percent for women respondents. Moreover, in comparison to literate respondents (ranging between 57.8% and 60.9%), a higher proportion of illiterate respondents (69%) reported low women empowerment level in the region (Singh 2014).

Table-III: Extent of Women Empowerment in Rural Bundelkhand of Uttar Pradesh (%)

	Low	Moderate	High	Total
By Gender				
Women	64.5	35.1	0.4	259
Men	60.0	40.0	0.0	110
By position				
Ward Members	61.4	38.0	0.6	171
Pradhans	68.3	31.7	0.0	60
Defeated & Former Representatives	66.1	33.9	0.0	62
Community Members	60.5	39.5	0.0	76
By Education				
Illiterate	69.0	31.0	0.0	168
Class I – VII	57.8	41.2	1.0	102
Class VIII – X	56.6	43.4	0.0	53
Class XI and above	60.9	39.1	0.0	46
Total	63.1	36.6	0.3	369

(Source: Study Report, Indian Social Institute, 2014)

Suggestions for Improvement:

Reservation of seats alone cannot ensure the effective participation of women in PRIs and their empowerment. To help them overcome the socio-cultural barriers including illiteracy, inexperience, lack of access and control over income and other resources, restrictions to public spaces etc., and carry the concept of empowerment forward, the government needs to make necessary amendments in the law. Since Panchayat is a state subject, appropriate policy measures should be taken by the state governments to take forward the agenda of empowerment of women through PRIs. Panchayat itself has to take proactive role in adopting multi-pronged strategies in bringing about quantitative as well as qualitative changes in the level of participation of women leading towards their empowerment. Some suggestive actions are indicated below to enhance the scope of improvement.

1. *Capacity Building of EWRs:* Panchayat can design, develop and implement capacity building and training (CB&T) exclusive for the Elected Women Representatives (EWRs). Separate training modules for them keeping in mind their educational level and cultural barriers may be designed making the content more simplified, more pictorial and interactive using case studies and short videos. Separate training programme for EWRs are expected to create an enabling

environment for open discussion and sharing. Adequate attention should also be given on comfortable and modest accommodation for them in case of residential training along with facilities for taking care of their children. Apart from training, exposure visit to model panchayats may be carried out to make them believe that women leaders can make a difference. Periodical handholding support may also be provided for the most backward EWRs. Use of user friendly latest technologies can also be used to corroborate the efforts.

2. *Sensitization of Government Officials:* All officials concerned with PRIs, including election officers, rural extension officers and particularly Panchayat functionaries (Executive Assistants, Panchayat Secretary, Lekhpal, etc.) should also be capacitated to understand and respond to issues of caste and gender discrimination, encourage greater information sharing and less bureaucratic control over Panchayat development schemes, so that these officials are able to better monitor and support WERs in the Panchayats to ensure others do not coerce them into relinquishing their powers.
3. *Provision for Special quorum of Women in Panchayat Meetings:* Reservation of seats alone cannot ensure the active participation of women in Panchayati Raj

Institutions. Therefore certain provisions should be made which mandates a minimum quorum of women in every Gram Sabha meetings. This will help ensuring participation of women in general. But the process in turn would create an enabling environment for the participation of women leaders and to exercise their power. It will also help change the mind set of male counterparts that women can play equal role provided they are given equal opportunity to work.

4. *Checking Proxy Participation:* Proxy participation of male members related to EWRs in Panchayat meetings which is considered as a major stumbling block in the way of empowerment of women must be checked at all level. Initially, they might have played a caring and nurturing role but the time has come to ward off proxy participation. Appropriate government should make rule and take effective measures to stop this. Developing reward or reprimand mechanism in a participatory way like formation of internal monitoring committee to reward women participation and reprimand proxy participation can work well.
5. *Involvement of CSOs:* CSOs can play very crucial role in empowerment of EWRs through PRIs. Expert CSOs should be involved in the process of capacity building and training (CB&T) by conducting training need assessment, designing and developing training modules and so on. It can create scope for innovation and creativity; break the monotony of boring classroom training method by making it more participatory. Apart from CB&T, CSOs can play lead role in generating awareness among the EWRs as well as society in general and pave the way for creating favourable atmosphere for the participation of women leaders. CSOs can make efforts to strengthen adult literacy programmes for women with adequate follow up, including establishing village literacy committees.
6. *Involvement of Media:* The media both print as well as electronic can also play an important role in creating awareness

among the elected women representatives in particular and society in general. It can act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice. It can promote best practices and good cases by sharing with general population. It can also draw the attention of government and non-government stakeholders where there is any violation of law or discrimination against women.

7. *Networking:* Developing a Common Forum of EWRs from a particular geography where they can share their problems, may get external innovative ideas to tackle local problems and learn from success stories. It gives them opportunity to build their confidence by showing the performance of other EWRs who are in the same boat but set good examples in their own Panchayats. CSOs and media should also be involved in developing and nurturing this kind of forum who can better present the ideas, share best practices, disseminate knowledges and bring innovation in the process.

Conclusion:

Though the 73rd Constitutional Amendment set a milestone in the history of India in making provision for participation of women in local level government but it could not yield satisfactory results in their participation as well as empowerment. Two decades after the amendment, it is now proved that reservation alone cannot ensure the effective participation of women in PRIs and their empowerment. Panchayat itself has to take lead role promoting the agenda of empowerment of women by making concrete actions. At the same time, multiple government and non-government stakeholders including CSOs and media have to join hand to take forward the agenda of women's empowerment. A concerted effort of all stakeholders has to put in place to push the agenda of empowerment of women. It is expected that elected women in Panchayats will not only perform their role like other elected representatives but will also make significant contribution to models of gendered governance with equity, social justice and efficient delivery of public goods and services in future.

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