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THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA: ASSESSING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ



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Introduction

Since India's independence, it has maintained a federal setup while centralizing major domains until the 1980s. 1991 economic reforms opened doors for state autonomy, allowing tailored policies. This shift placed India on the global stage but necessitated decentralization due to its vast diversity and population. Decentralization empowers local governance, promoting democracy, development, and effective governance. In 1992, the Three Tier System was constitutionally recognized, materializing Panchayati Raj Institutions and enabling women's active participation in politics and decision-making at the grassroots level. Despite these strides, women still face barriers due to India's patriarchal society and social divisions. While reservations and many other constitutional provisions were introduced to empower women, their involvement often results from obligation rather than genuine desire. Therefore, mechanisms are needed to encourage women's active and voluntary participation in local governance, establishing their role as stakeholders in a patriarchal society.

Constitutional Provisions

The Indian Constitution not only guarantees women's equality but also empowers the state to implement affirmative action measures to address their accumulated socio-economic, educational, and political disadvantages. Fundamental Rights

ensure equality before the law, prohibiting discrimination based on religion, race, caste, gender, or place of birth. Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 16, 39(a), 39(b), 39(c), and 42 are particularly relevant in this context. Article 14 enforces equality before the law, Article 15 prevents discrimination, and Article 15(3) mandates specific provisions for women and children. Article 16 ensures equal opportunity in employment, while Article 39(a) emphasizes equal means of subsistence for both genders, and Article 39(d) demands equal pay for equal work. To promote justice through equal opportunity and provide free legal aid, Article 39A is enacted. Article 51(A)(e) urges the promotion of harmony and the protection of women's dignity. Additionally, the Constitution mandates the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats and Municipalities, including rotational representation and reserved chairmanships, to empower women in local governance (Articles 243D (3), 243D (4), 243T (3), 243T(4)). These constitutional provisions reflect India's commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment.

Issues Faced by Women in Panchayats

Women have always faced the wrath of gender-biased discrimination by society, sensed marginalized in different phases of their lives, and have been victims of male domination, amongst many other problems that they experience. The intensity of these issues faced by women is much higher in

rural areas (Singh, 2021), which undoubtedly stops them from participating in political affairs at the local level in a full-fledged manner.

Lack of Political Literacy

In rural India, while research consistently highlights the positive link between education and political engagement, a stark contradiction exists. Despite constituting 81.29% of the rural workforce, 56% of rural women are illiterate (Gunjan, 2018), impeding their participation in local politics. Many are unaware of constitutional provisions meant to empower them. Basic education is crucial to impart knowledge of their rights, foster political awareness, and promote personal growth. Education can transform women into informed, active citizens, improving governance and benefiting the nation. However, deep-seated patriarchy, limited educational access, poor-quality schools, and poverty act as formidable barriers, leaving illiterate women vulnerable to manipulation and unaware of their official roles and responsibilities.

Women as 'Rubber Stamps'

Pervasive patriarchy in society hinders women's empowerment, even in local government. Reservations for women in politics often lead to men exploiting their positions, leaving women relegated to ceremonial roles. Female leaders elected to Panchayats often succumb to family pressures, primarily from male relatives (Saurabh, 2023). While women secure electoral victories, real responsibilities usually rest with male family members. These men handle public inquiries, relegating women to domestic duties. This reinforces the concept of 'Sarpanch Pati' where husbands manipulate their wives into running for office, knowing they will retain control over village governance. Women are left as figureheads, while men continue to wield power de facto.

Impact of Caste in Panchayats

Caste has always been a dominant factor in the Indian political scenario. In due course of time, efforts have made caste somewhat less visible but it still persists in current times. Societal barriers persist, impeding Dalits from uplifting themselves, particularly affecting Dalit women who face dual marginalization due to their lower caste and gender. Despite the emergence of Dalit women leaders, discrimination persists in voting rights and during their tenure in positions of power (Malik and Srivastava, 2011). Instances include segregation from higher-caste individuals, denial of access to public resources,

disregard for their decisions, and enduring a patriarchal, caste-biased society. While there has been progress in the numerical representation of Dalit women in panchayats, these entrenched biases continue to hinder their full enjoyment of constitutional freedoms and opportunities.

While these issues remain prominent, many other issues such as party politics in the grassroots level, the increasing digital divide, women's safety in Panchayats etc pose concrete challenges for women to exercise their powers and overall hampers the functioning of local governance in the country.

Recommendations

- **Promote Education:** Encourage education among women, both leaders and voters, through awareness campaigns, improved access to quality schooling, and skill development opportunities.
- **Establish Monitoring Teams:** Create vigilant monitoring teams comprising women's organizations, community leaders, government officials, and gender equality experts to oversee women's participation in local bodies and ensure gender-sensitive policies are implemented.
- **Engage Civil Society:** Civil society organizations can provide capacity-building courses, leadership development programs, and technical skill development, as well as organize gender sensitization workshops and advocate for gender-responsive policies.
- **Uniform Women's Reservation:** Implement a uniform and mandated increase in women's reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions nationwide, accompanied by awareness campaigns and capacity-building for female candidates.
- **Mentorship Programs:** Engage experienced women leaders within Panchayati Raj to mentor and share their experiences with aspiring and current female leaders.
- **Bridge the Gender Digital Divide:** Prioritize reducing the gender digital divide by providing reliable internet connectivity, affordable digital devices, and tailored digital literacy programs for rural women.
- **Seat Rotation with Extended Tenures:** Introduce seat rotation with extended tenures of over 5 years to ensure deeper understanding and sustained focus on women's needs within Panchayati Raj institutions.

Conclusion

The position of women in Indian panchayats reveals a complex struggle for gender equity in governance, entangled with

historical biases and contemporary challenges. This multifaceted issue demands a comprehensive strategy encompassing education and awareness. Affordable, quality education in rural areas is crucial, fostering informed decision-making. Simultaneously, dismantling the patriarchal structure is vital, moving beyond symbolic representation to empower women as effective change-makers. Transformative legislation, policy shifts, and attitudinal changes are essential. Balancing gender dynamics in politics is emphasized, requiring open dialogue alongside party-free elections. Women's engagement drives holistic growth, shaping comprehensive, compassionate, and equitable legislation. India's path forward lies in building an inclusive polity that empowers women as transformative forces in governance, uniting the nation's aspirations.

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