

Participation of Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions: Block Level Study of Jammu and Kashmir

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Introduction

Panchayati Raj is not a new phenomenon in the country. Its illustration in history goes back to more than a 1000 years. It has its roots in Ancient Indian institutions, when the villages were little republics governed by their Panchayat's. During this period it was not that women could not join politics, but the fact was that they did not take interest in it due to patriarchal setup. The British through their ruthless method of revenue collection and the introduction of Zamindari land tenure system almost destroyed these ancient republics and as well the involvement of women in politics. However certain attempts were made to setup local governments. The first of its nature was Lord Mayo's resolution in 1870. He introduced his scheme for decentralization of administration. The scheme had a stimulating effect on the development of local self governing institutions.

The next landmark in the development of local self government was Lord Rippon's Resolution of 1882. It consisted of many recommendations. After this there were attempts to improve Local Governments through the acts of 1909, 1919 and 1935. However there were no real intentions of Britishers to decentralize power. It was merely an arrangement to suit their imperial requirements.

After independence, despite having a constitution which embodies lofty ideals equity and equality, social justice could not be achieved so far. Even when India had a woman Prime Minister for a quite number of years, the situation of women at large did not change for the better. Women's participation in politics remained quite insignificant in India even after years of self rule.

From Oct 2nd, 1959 when the first Panchayat Raj was inaugurated, on April 24, 1993 after the 73rd amendment act came into force it has been an uncertain and undulating journey for Panchayats. If the overall scenario of Panchayats was largely despairing, another disgusting aspect is that almost one half of the rural population was virtually kept out of Panchayat arena. In the traditional caste Panchayats, village Panchayats and in the British scheme of local governments women remained entirely excluded. It took 43 years to realize and recognize that women are yet another disadvantaged group and women has received a preferential consideration and that too only in the sphere of political representation that again in local governments.

Women are changing the governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in an unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the constitution that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments. In India we called this new system the Panchayat Raj Institution System (PRI). The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in one village, or a large area such as 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national, political and administrative system started on recently as January 1994, and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structure of the government. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into political system has made a difference. The percentage of women at various levels of political activity has shifted dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from 4.5% before to 25 – 40% after. But the difference is also qualitative because these women are bringing their experience in the governance of civic society. In this way they are making the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

However, in case of J&K state, initially during the regime of Maharaja Hari Singh, PRI's in the modest way were introduced into the state and several powers also bestowed on them for raising of taxes and non – taxes besides funding for addressing the infrastructural needs of the rural community.

The J&K Panchayat Raj Act was enacted in 1989. The first election under the act were held in 2001, although they can't be completed in all parts of the state due to the prevailing situation. The Panchayat bodies could not, therefore, become functional in the state the last two decades. After then the elections were held in the year 2011. The response to the elections, conducted

during the period March 14 to June 27, 2011 has been overwhelming in all the three regions of the state. In all, 4082 Sarpanches and 28,253 Panches have been elected with state level average voter turnout of about 77.71%.

Methodology

The present study is conducted in Quil village of district Bandipora of Kashmir Province of J&K State. Bandipora district is one of the 22 in J&K State in northern India. Bandipora town is the administrative headquarter of the district. This district was carved out from the erstwhile Baramulla district in 2007. This district is bounded by Kupwara district in the west, Baramulla district in south and Kargil, Ganderbal and Srinagar district in the east. This district occupies an area of 398 km². The district has population of 3,06,511 (2001 census).

Divisions: The district comprises of three tehsils: Bandipora, Sumal Sonawari and Gurez. The district has three assembly constituencies: Gurez, Bandipora and Sonawari. All of these three are part of Baramulla Lok Sabha Constituency.

Blocks: Bandipora district consists of five blocks: Bandipora, Gurez, Tulial, Sumbal and Hajin. Each block consists of a number of panchayats. Bandipora, the district headquarter is about 55 kms from Srinagar accessible by road as well as by river Jehlum.

Out of these five blocks only Quil village of Bandipora block has been selected for this purpose. This village (Quil) has been divided into eight wards. In all of eight wards three women elected representatives are there and they have been selected for the previously mentioned purpose. Interview Schedule was used to elicit the required information. The Interview Schedule comprised of (a) Demographic profile of the respondents, (b) factors affecting women members for performing their roles, and (c) Expectations and suggestions for better leadership.

Results and Discussion

The present study was conducted with the aim to study the “Participation of Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions”. The information was elicited as per the objectives of the study.

Respondents Profile: Out of three respondents, two were above the age of 50 years. One respondent was young in the age group varying from 30-35 years. It may be stated here that age factor is off course a significant factor. A matured age reflects quite sound and reasonable views in conformity with the needs and necessities warranted by the circumstances (Table 1). All the three respondents were married and only one possessed academic qualification of up to 8th standard. The two women elected representatives (WER’s) fall into the age group of 50-55 years. It indicated that they tend to enter the Panchayati Raj institutions when they had become relatively free of family responsibilities regarding children.

It is interesting to know that no women panch was paid any honorarium for her work. It there by shows that these WER’s were working on self fewer bases for an overall general welfare and development of the people and that of the women interests in particular.

Table 1: Respondents Profile (N= 3)

Age (in years)	Number	Marital Status		Education			Income
		Widow	Married	Low	Middle	High	
30 – 50	01	-	1	-	01	-	-
51 – 70	02	-	02	-	-	-	-

Political Profile of Respondent

All of the respondents were elected in the year 2011 in the PRI’s. They contested election from reserved seats. Two of the respondents have political affiliation and one contested election as independent candidate and later joined a political party. Two respondents were from PDP and the third one joined NC (Table 2).

The support from any party however does not always imply that the person is an active member of the party. It may be added here that some respondents seek membership of political party after their successful context in the elections. However in some cases sometimes the respondents enjoyed backing and support of a political party as well. Also it was seen that women leaders have links with one or the other political party as such members were persuaded and astonished by their political mentors who were already in politics. I came across that women are supported by political parties, reason being affiliation to such political and constitutional change is making women to some extent as a puppet in such organizations.

However, large size of participation of women in Panchayat Raj institutions could take place because of reservation of seats for the women candidates.

Table 2: Political Profile of Respondents (N=3)

Category			Political Party						Present Position			
G	R		NC		PDP		Independent		Sarpanch		Panch	
	SC	ST	G	R	G	R	G	R	G	R	G	R
03	-	-	01	-	02	-	-	-	-	-	03	-

ü G= General

ü R= Reserved

ü SC= Schedule Caste

ü ST= Schedule Tribe

ü NC= National Conference

ü PDP= Peoples Democratic Party

Reasons for Contesting Elections

All the respondents wished to help people in the society and to work for the development of the concerned village. One respondent mentioned that she was motivated by her in – laws and husband to contest election and the other one mentioned that she wanted to prove her identity and was also backed and motivated by the political party with which she was affiliated already and the third one mentioned that since there was no women available, she thus contested elections (Table 03).

Table 03: Reason for Contesting Elections

S. No.	Reason	Frequency
01	Hold Power	01
02	Help people in society	03
03	Pressure from family members	01
04	Pressure from party	01
05	Non – availability of women representatives	01

Meetings attended by Women Elected Representatives(WER's)in Panchayats:

Two of the respondents mentioned that they have freedom of expression in the meetings. But the other one mentioned that she is not free to put forth her point of view. Gender disparity is found to be the major reason for not entertaining their viewpoints as male member's view point's are preferred in male – headed Panchayats (Table 04) Other reason being that they felt hesitant to present their views in front of the male members. Also one mentioned that it is difficult to attend the meeting's reason being domestic constraints. Also, they mentioned that we are facing a lot of problems and male members do not cooperate with elected women ward members. The reservation of women in such organizations alone will not help them to make decisions unless she becomes assertive.

Table 04: Meetings Attended by WER's in Panchayats (N=03)

Respondents		Attended Meetings		Conveying of unscheduled Meetings	
Yes	No	Regular	Sometimes	Yes	No
03	-	03	-	02	01

Reasons for not attending meetings:

ü Domestic Constraints

Problems Faced by Women Elected Representative's (WER's)

WER's say that they face problems from other panchs due to their self motive; panchayat members were exclusively guided by their personal interest. One of the respondent argued that they primarily face on the basis of gender discrimination. The women representatives thus felt hurt for not having been heard or supported and even if they presented befitting and relevant arguments (table 05). One respondent alone revealed that even the female colleagues for their personal views and differences did not support her.

Table 05: Problems Faced by WER's (N=03)

S. no.	Problems	Frequency
01	Self – motive of Panch members	02
02	Interference	02
03	Lack of support from male members	03
04	Lack of support from female members	02
05	Inhibition in speaking in front of family members	02

ü Showing multiple response

Decision taken by Women in Panchayat and the Problems they face while dealing with the Administration

The respondents mentioned that they took decisions at their own halqa level and discussed these things at the panchayat meetings as they opined that they are confident enough that decisions taken by them will benefit the people of their respective halqa's. But they mentioned that there was gender discrimination and male domination. Also, one reported that women are not informed or invited to the meetings at sometimes.

Also, they revealed that least times they receive support from government and administration. But largely they did not receive support being the male domination of administration, who were either discourteous or corrupt, showing utter disregard on gender basis morally, materially which also at times resulted in complete and total disassociation with the administration (Table 06).

Table 06: Decisions taken by Women in Panchayats (N=03)

Decision taken		If no, Reason			
Yes	No	Lack of Confidence	Views are not considered	Unaware about agenda	Never attended meetings
01	02	01	02	01	-

Factors motivating women to take part in Panchayats and provide better performances

The respondents preferred literacy, social confidence and skill training for performance as an efficient leader for welfare and development of the people. Also they believed that experience, self decision making power and honorarium would strengthen them to perform better. They also wanted some sort of freedom from family and community.

The respondents reported that economic independence, family encouragement, transparency in PRI's and administration, support from government officials would go a long way in motivating the women folk to participate in Panchayat. Also it is imperative that she needs a thorough helping programs that would provide her education and confidence building initiatives which could council her participation of activities required for becoming representative of people in one form or the other (Table 07).

Table 07: Factors that motivate women to take part in panchayat and perform betterly. (N=03)

S. No.	Factors	Frequency
01	Community and family restrictions	01
02	Literacy	03
03	Self decision making power	03
04	Honorarium	03
05	Village cooperation	03
06	Ability to speak in public	02
07	Orientation program for Panches	03
08	Experience	02
09	No male domination	03
10	Transparency	03
11	Communication skills	02

ii Multiple responses

Conclusion

In Indian constitution there are provisions for equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their social and economic status. However, such provisions exist only in pen and paper for millions of economically and socially disadvantaged people in India especially SC's, ST's and women. In India women are in such worst position than men not only in terms of sex ratio, literacy rate, workforce, participation, life expectancy, but also in terms of their access to power structure which controls and guides the development programs of a society. Since access to political opportunities and participation in political decision making process are important components of capability and autonomy, discrimination in this respect leads to wastage of women's talent and efficiency which are necessary for all round development of the country. One of the three variables used in the construction of the Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) is the relative share of women in administration and managerial position (UNDP, 1995). Women need to be involved in decision making process in order to bring their demands in the national agenda. In order to ensure empowerment of women in political arena, the issue of reservation of 1/3rd of seats for women, the Government of India passed the 73rd constitutional amendment, which was followed by the 74th amendment mandating reservation of 1/3rd of seats to women in all village, block and district level elected bodies but not in State assemblies and in the parliament.

The role of female Panchayat members in decision making process has been examined on the basis of data collection by interviewing the WER's of Quil village of Block Bandipora, District Bandipora, J&K. The present entitled, "Participation of Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions", is a study conducted to know the extent of women's participation in decision making and stumbling blocks for women in their respective roles. The study shows that WER's attended Panchayat meeting's regularly but there was not the full freedom of speech and expression in the Panchayat meetings. They reported that their views were not as such considered, the major reason being patriarchal setup and there by non-cooperation. The male members are not encouraging women and they are not in any way prepared to reconcile with either a superior or even an equal position for their women members. The data indicates that the female Panch members feel that there should be practically no interference from the family and community stalling the independent functioning of the Panch women members. The Panch members complained that they get no assistance and help from family members in discharging of their domestic work. Also they mentioned that no financial assistance which is a necessary ingredient for their self esteem, their independent functioning and their committed concern and approach to the needs of urges of the people of the area.

In conclusion, it may be considered that to achieve the women empowerment, advancement can be facilitated with the coordination of different sections of the society such as male gentry, religious heads, political leaders, who should come forward and shun their interpersonal interests even ego to understand and appreciate that the women are equally as important segments of society as men. Male Chauvinism must go the sooner so much the better. Unless the male ridden society is transformed and replaced by a better socio-economic setup where men and women are equal co-workers, the future of human setup appears to be bleak.

Suggestions

Ø It is evident that men's attitude towards women's entry into politics has began to change from that of total rejection to limited encouragement. This trend needs to be strengthened, through orientation courses and training programs to train women leaders at regular intervals to enable them to manage the responsibilities assigned to them in the Panchayats at all levels.

> Another important effort required for real empowerment of rural women is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and rearing children needs to be transformed into a feeling of equal partnership of women and men. To inculcate this they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both.

Ø Studies on women in politics have emphasized that contact with outside world makes women more alert and also active in the political process. There could be two ways of doing it. Firstly, interaction between enlightened rural women and illiterate elected one's should be encouraged. Secondly, these women could be taken out to the urban area and their interaction with educated urban elected women representatives be arranged.

The women should also be encouraged to organize themselves. Some successful women's organization can also act as catalytic for encouraging the women's participation in social and political activities.