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WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY: ISSUES & CHALLENGES IN EMPOWERMENT

SURBHI AGARWAL
C.C.S. UNIVERSITY,MEERUT

The status of women in India has been subjected to many great changes over the past few decades. From the confinement to the walls of home and taking care of the family in ancient times, the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have adorned high offices in India including that of the President, Prime minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of the Opposition, Chief Minister of State etc. Women have contributed in all of the spheres of technical advancement of and for humanity. Women were and are resourceful, passionate, competent and creative about their work as any other male representative.

Although currently women have a good number of representatives in Indian democracy but still a number of challenges are there hindering the development of Indian women and their role in Indian democracy. To curb this issue the primary requisite is to work on the grassroot levels so that women are empowered enough to represent themselves independently. For this women should be properly educated and should be brought up in a highly competent environment so that they can fight and make their mark in this world of cut throat competition. Education will not only uplift women but will also eliminate the puppets from the system; puppets can be referred to those who are in driving seat but others have the control.

The objective of present study is to enlighten the issues and challenges of representation of women in Indian democracy.

Women's political participation has been considered a major measure of women's empowerment. Globally, through histories of the world we have records of very few regents, sovereigns, and active agents in nobility who were women. Champions of liberalism like John Stuart Mill had advocated women's participation in governance by the struggle for women suffrage in the self avowed liberal west very well illustrates the entrenched nature of Patriarchical resistance to women's empowerment. In the last century more women heads of state could be counted in Asia as compared to Europe and the struggle for women suffrage in India was physically less violent but this is not reflective of greater acceptance of women in decision-making in public spaces.

To measure women's empowerment now GEM takes 3 indicators, women's participation in economic, political and professional activities. Within political power what is measured is mainly women in parliament, judiciary or in local bodies. Women's empowerment or disempowerment has to be seen in all areas physical, socio cultural religious, political legal and economic.

It is also now often pointed out that women's empowerment must be seen as a process where in we must consider women's awareness consciousness, choices with live alternatives, resources at their disposal, voice, agency and participation. These are all related to enhancement of women's capabilities and decisions they take individually or collectively for themselves.

Several programmes in India like Mahila Samakhya have accepted the process nature of women's empowerment. The understandings of empowerment in PACS has also been similar but planning of activity, time and budgets to ensure the empowering processes need greater scrutiny. Women's education, livelihood and personal exercise of agency have to be systematically promoted .

The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution have impacted nearly 600 million Indian people in 500,000 villages. Interestingly the percentage of women at various levels of political activity have risen from 4-5% to 25-40%. Both nationally as well as at the state and local levels women in elected bodies have been very few and even those who have been elected when observed from closer quarters present a complex picture. The money and muscle associated with the electoral process inhibits a large number of women from joining politics. Restriction on mobility, lack of control over resources and low literacy rates are well known obstacles but recent panchayat elections have evidenced a phenomenally large number of elected leaders much beyond reserved 33% seats. Areas where PACS, Mahila Samakhya or other CSO initiatives are working women are more articulate and vigilant and have used opportunity to improve ICPS centres, primary schools sanitation and have also publicly dealt with issues of misbehavour with girls, violence and alcoholism as well as sensitive issues of widowed women dressing in coloured clothes. Women are increasingly demanding not only basis but also land literacy and fuller longer trainings instead of being short changed through orientations.

It is obvious that a more active Gram Sabha which is sensitive to women's specific issues is a much desired goal as a woman *sarpanch* or BDC member in a gender hostile *panchayat* may not be able to accomplish and sustain much for the benefit of women or the village community at large. More women in grass root organizations; better law and order will ensure better engagement of women in decision-making.

More than one million women have now entered political life in India and 43% of the seats are occupied by them district, province and national level. Women's participation is understood in terms of voter turn out, number of women contestants apart from the number of those who succeeded in winning.

In an interesting study sponsored by State Planning Commission in U.P. 2006 about 45% women both rural and urban reported being influenced by men of the family (father/husband) in decision-making in the exercise of their ballot. 9 per cent reported external influence while 46 per cent exercise independent choice.

However, the battle to make the PRI's affective instruments of local rural governance is a battle, a struggle of the grass roots, population (women and men) against administrative apathy and listlessness, against ignorance and low awareness. For women these odds are accompanied and

intermeshed with deep rooted patriarchal practices that determine and sanction norms of speech and behaviour both within and outside the home.

Thus while Pre election trainings of voluntary organisations and CSVOs serve to build awareness about the duties, responsibilities of PR's and about voting practices, the presence and working of women's voluntary organisations at the grass roots have served to sharpen women's understanding about the operation of patriarchy in personal lives and work places and the methods and practices to overcome and combat them individually and collectively.

Organisations such as Mahila Samakhya working to conscientise and organise women in groups and sanghas are able to address the issue of women and their participation in a two fold manner. On the one hand they organise intensive training programmes for women PRI representatives to make them effective functionaries and on the other hand tghere own programmes with their members within there collectives serve to build a culture of questioning, critical thinking, collective decision-making and mobilisation on public issues.
A mobilised community of women is thus able to raise issues of significance to the local community within the meetings, demand accountably from representatives and administrative officials regarding financial and procedural matters and intervene with creative suggestions.

It is thus that the dominance of patriarchy money power, party politics muscle power are steadily undercut and eroded and women's concerns are gradually pushed to the forefront of local politics.

Drawing from intensive discussions at the level of sanghas and mahasanghas and the experiences culled called from functionaries and from trainings, Mahila Samakhya has drawn out learnings to strengthen women's participation in the Panchayats. A memorandum incorporating these has been presented to the Panchayat Raj Department. It states —
• It is imperative to inscribe the budget for the village on the Panchayat Bhawan.
• Thefre should be rules and strategies to train and activate women members who have been elected to the post of Pradhans or members.
• There should be strict rules for ensuring the participation of 2/3 voters in the open meeting.
• the signatures of the people in the executive register of the open meeting should be ensured.
• It should be compulsory for the Pradhan/Secretary to sit in the panchayat Bhawan.
• The development plan should be widely disseminated so that it can reach the general public.
• The dates and time of the panchayat meetings in the state of U.P. should be decided in advance.
• The venue of the meeting should be either the Panchayat Bhawan ofr a public place, to enable all gram sabha members to present their problems.
Thus it is apparent that women see effective and efficient functioning of panchayats closely linked to the issue of active women's participation. (Mahila Samakhya U.P. Annual Report 20045-05.

Entry into public space, utilisation of authority in practice, trainings by government and nongovernment agencies are all part of a process of gradual growth of knowledge, self-esteem and empowerment, which gives women the agency to function effectively in the political process.
Even proxy and dummy candidates may experience this process of empowerment women who stand and win from general seats are more likely to have a higher commitment towards, and an understanding of the political process.

Having a high participation of women at the local self government level can create an environment which is enabling for other women, receptive to the idea of gender based initiatives and can serve to monitor and implement community and gender based programmes of the government related to education, nutrition and health.

It offers a potential opportunity which can be utilised at an optimum level by appropriate trainings both capacity binding and information enhancing – by government departments and the NGO Sector.

The issues in empowerment of women in Indian democracy is the representative participation of women in maximum numbers .

The major challenge is that the women participating in politics should be self efficient, self decisive and educated. Women should have developed conscience in them so that they can take right decisions and should be able to solve problems by their own. Women should not work as puppets who work on ideas of others.

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