

## Salient Features

### **‘Women’s Participation in Panchayati Raj: Nature and Effectiveness**

- A Northern India Perspective

*Reservation provides the possibility of a voice for women; it does not guarantee it. Thus, being in numbers is not enough. It becomes important to study the nature and efficacy with which the women members are able to participate in the PRI. The present work is based on the participation of the first set of the elected women members in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) after the Constitutional Amendment of 1992. The work provides an insight to their level of participation. The findings of the study could prove instrumental in reservation of seats at various levels of the government.*

### **Introduction**

Women’s representation in political decision-making has been identified as their democratic right world over. Their representation in political decision-making has been considered essential to address the issue of gender inequality and other forms of oppression. The reason for the international concern on women’s political participation can be well understood because of the simple but vital fact that women constitute half of the world’s population but when it comes to their role in political decision-making their number is even less than 10%. World over women constitute 70% of the world’s poor, two thirds of the world’s illiterates, work for longer hours than men and face the threat of violence from cradle till grave. But the one area where they are almost negligible by way of their numbers is in decision-making in the field of politics.

The situation is even more grave in the South Asia where women have the lowest rate of political participation. In most of the South Asian countries the need for constitutional provisions in the form of reservation of seats has been realized as an imperative action and steps taken to incorporate it into the system. As a result today the representation of women at national level in South Asia ranges from 20.3% in Pakistan to 2% in Bangladesh; at state/ provincial level from 16.9% in Pakistan to 3.2% in Sri Lanka; and at the local level from 33% in India to 1.97% in Sri Lanka. India made a move in this direction in 1992 through the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution.

## **Women in Indian Politics**

In India, the number of women in Lok Sabha has increased in the past fifty years, but it has never crossed 10% of the total number of seats of Lok Sabha. Even in the recent parliamentary elections held last month, the representation of women at Parliament has not crossed 10% of the total Parliament seats. The turning point occurred in 1992, when the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha passed the 73<sup>rd</sup> and the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, thus making the Panchayats and Municipalities as ‘institutions of self-government’. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendments can be seen as landmark in the Indian Women’s Movement as it secures 33% reservation of seats for the Indian rural women. However it needs to be kept in mind that the reservation in India has been introduced in a scenario marked by

- ◆ Illiteracy
- ◆ Male dominance
- ◆ Casteism
- ◆ Deep rooted cultural beliefs
- ◆ Values, which do not encourage women’s assertion.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment for the first time brought 33-40% women into decision-making process, from the miniscule 2-4% in earlier years. This meant 10 lakh (1 million) women coming into grassroots level politics for the first time in 1992. Reservation provides the possibility of a voice for women, it does not guarantee it. Thus, being in numbers is not enough. It becomes important to study the nature and efficacy with which the women members are able to participate in the PRI.

### **The Study**

The study aims to describe the nature and effectiveness of participation of women members in PRI. It also provides a socio-economic and political profile of the elected women members; their level of awareness of their rights and responsibilities; the nature of concern among them regarding issues pertaining to women and children; their future aspirations; and the opinion of the public and male members regarding participation of elected women members.

The study focuses on the women's participation in the Gurgaon district in the Indian state of Haryana. Haryana is characterized by an alarmingly adverse sex ratio in favour of the male gender, the ratio being 874 women to 1000men. It is a highly male dominated society. The participation of women in politics in Haryana has been very insignificant until recent past. In-fact before the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment their number in the PRI was simply negligible. From negligibility to 33% seats out of the total can be seen as a big shift.

### **Methodology Adopted**

Multistage purposive sampling was used to select the different tiers of PRI for collection of data. This included one Zilla Parishad (ZP), two Panchayat Samitis (PS), and eight Gram Panchayats (GP). The PS and the GPs were matched on the basis of sex and education of the heads of the respective tiers. All the elected women members from the selected ZP, PS, GP were included. An equal number of male members were selected. Further, a sample from electorate of the eight villages was drawn using convenient sampling. An effort was made to study the views of both the men and the women electorate. Meetings of all the three tiers were attended to substantiate the research findings. Both quantitative and qualitative data has been collected. For this purpose three different schedules were developed. Total of 116 elected members, including an equal number of men and women members, were interviewed. 100 members of the electorate, including both men and women, were also interviewed.

### **Findings of the Study**

The major findings of the study are presented in two parts. First part deals with the socio-economic and political profile and second part deals with the factors influencing participation of women in the PRI. Some of the major highlights of the research work are given below:

- **Socio-Economic and Political Profile**

1. Mean age of the women members is 44.5 years.

2. All of them are married.
3. Large number (45%) have not attended the school but as high as 55% have been to school. In comparison 90% of the men members are educated and difference in the education qualification of men and women members is significant.
4. An equal number of women members belong to the lowest income strata and to the highest income strata, i.e. Rs. 10,000-20,000 per annum and Rs. 50,000 and above. Similar trend was seen in the case of women member's land holding.
5. Majority of the women members have entered the field of politics for the first time as no one from their families had ever held a political position in the past.
6. They were not very active in working towards their village welfare prior to their getting elected.
7. The women members were found to be low on their political awareness such as on Panchayati Raj Act, State Pnachayati Raj Act, and political parties working in the village and on the women's reservation in the panchayats.

- **Participation**

Some striking findings of the study regarding participation of women members are:

1. The quality of participation of the women members in the meetings at all the three tiers was observed to be low and this holds true for the men members also.
2. The men members feel more positively about the reservation of seats for women than the women members themselves.
3. The men members view women's participation more positively than the women members do.
4. The women members have not been able to take up women related issues in the meetings in a major way.
5. Women seem to give importance to the issues that the men consider important.
6. The participation of the women members in the meetings and their taking interest in the village activities is directly correlated to the attitude of the Head towards reservation for women.
7. The women feel free to approach the women members with their problems that they could not do with the men members.

8. The participation of the women members was seen to vary within the three tiers that is, gram panchayat, panchayat samiti and zilla parishad.
9. There is no variation in the functioning of the Panchayati Raj System (PRS) on the basis of the gender of the head of the tier.
10. More than 50% of the women members were observed to attend the meetings.
11. The women members are highly ambitious, even more ambitious than their male counterparts as revealed by their political aspirations.
12. The women members perceive specific gains by holding the political position.
13. A large number of the women members have the support of their family in continuing to be in the present position.

### **Suggestions**

Some of the specific suggestions given by the members, both men and women for improving participation of women are as follows:

1. Training on various aspects of the PRS should be provided to the women members. Provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, writing records, conducting meetings, understanding of bureaucratic structure, government schemes for the rural poor, unemployed, education, public distribution system, etc. are some of the areas in which training could be given.
2. A minimum educational qualification criterion should be laid down for the contestants, particularly the women contesting for the panchayat elections.
3. Family and Government support.
4. Change in the attitude of the public towards women interested in politics.

To conclude, the findings of the study are indicative of a positive mindset of the rural Indian women who are willing to embrace their traditional roles and the new responsibilities with determination.

The book outlay consists of seven chapters. *Chapter 1* introduces the study and gives the framework of the conducted research study under the title 'Women's Search for Political Space: A Framework for Research'. *Chapter 2* 'Women in Political Decision Making' introduces the status of women with special reference to their political status at the

international and the national level simultaneously reflecting on the government initiatives taken. This chapter reviews in detail the existing literature on women and their participation in Panchayati Raj and identifies the existing gaps in the literature. *Chapter 3* is a Conceptual Review of Participation and Empowerment. It introduces the concept of participation and empowerment with specific reference to women in decision making in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) and provides various frameworks adopted by different authors for studying participation. *Chapter 4* reviews the history of the Panchayati Raj Institutions in India along with reflecting on the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution. This chapter also reviews the women's historical position in the PRI and provides a critique of the panchayati system. *Chapter 5* 'Haryana, Women and Panchayati Raj' describes briefly the development of the State of Haryana and structural framework of Panchayati Raj Institutions in the State. *Chapter 6* presents the analysis with discussion of the collected data. *Chapter 7* 'Conclusions and Recommendations' summarises the major findings of the study and makes summary recommendations for enhancement of women's participation in the Panchayati Raj. The report is concluded with Bibliography, Annexures and Appendices.