



Understanding the Participation of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) In Panchayati Raj Institutions



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ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to understand the impact of political quotas on the participation of elected women representatives at grass root level. I have tried to understand the participation of elected women representatives (EWRs) through the vantage point of public- private dichotomy. The power relations in the private sphere has an inevitable impact on their participation in political and public sphere. Throughout the paper, I have focused on two main issues. First, How the use of participatory tool for elected women representatives failed in ensuring the real participation of women in grass root politics. Second, whether women were co-opted in the existing power structure or the existing power relations were challenged.

Keywords : Political participation, Quotas, Public- Private dichotomy, Gender, Institutional Constraints, Structural constraints.

INTRODUCTION- Politics in India is dominated by men. Women, who constituted half of the population has always remained at the periphery of the political discourse for decades because of patriarchal societal structure supplemented by biased institutional designs. Their exclusion from mainstream political life created hindrances in developmental progress. It was for the first time in 1992 that a National policy was designed and quotas were envisioned for women. The 73rd Amendment Act mandated reservations for women in local government institutions. This Quota based reservation for women in local government also signaled a more inclusive democracy.

The 73rd amendment act 1992 added a new Part (ix) to the constitution titled 'The Panchayats' covering provisions from article 243 to 243 (O), and a new 11th schedule covering 29 subjects within the functions of the Panchayats. It was only through the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts to the Constitution in 1992 that gave Constitutional status to the PRIs, and prescribed a mandatory quota in them of 33 percent for women. The Constitutional 73rd amendment has laid down in Article 243 D (3) that not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct elections in every Panchayats be reserved for women and that such seats be allotted by rotation and to different constituencies in a Panchayat. While article 243 D (4) provides that the offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats at the village or other levels shall be reserved for women and such reservation shall not be less than one-third of total number of seats. The reservations mandated by

73rd Amendment Act provided a legitimate opportunity for women to participate and influence the decision making process.

OBJECTIVES

The research objectives for this paper includes :

1. To assess the quality of participation of women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions.
2. To examine the impact of political quotas for women on their participatory function in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I have reviewed two sets of literature to understand both the theoretical concerns and practical concerns relating to the participation of women in political institutions. The theoretical concerns are based on Susan Moller Okin and Sherry Ortner's works and points to the 'Public- Private dichotomy' and the role of biological determinism which renders women as ineffective. While the practical concerns pertains to the works of Niraja Gopal Jayal , Esther Duflo, Sudha Pai and others which alludes to the role of institutional design and social constraints effecting the political participation of women.

Susan Moller Okin argued that the Public Sphere is also a reflection of what happens in the private sphere. The disparities within family which can be attributed to gendered division of labour systematically marginalise women in the Political Sphere. The family is the place where individuals are socialised. But it has turned into a place for constructing gendered selves which then percolates to other sphere. Okin also criticised communitarians, liberals and libertarians for keeping family beyond the purview of justice. The disparity within family would deny equality of opportunity and this inequality in one sphere would overflow into another Public Sphere.

Nirja Gopal Jayal argued whether quota based reservation for women have facilitated better participation for women in local government institutions. She employed *Maxine Molyneux's* distinction between '*Practical and Strategic Gender Interests*'¹ to evaluate the impact of quantitative reservation on qualitative participation. She pointed out that reservation certainly enabled women representatives to address '*Practical Gender Interests*' while '*Strategic Gender Interests*' are moving at low speed. Various social and institutional constraints such as rotation, quorum, no-confidence motion, patriarchal and Casteist structures inhibited the participation of women *representatives* in local government institutions.

There is a well-established gender gap in policy preferences of both men and Women. *R. Chattopadhyay and E.Duflo* studied the impact of reservation for women in Panchayats on the developmental outcomes in West Bengal and Rajasthan. They pointed out that women spend more on education, health, and nutrition and other expenditure benefitting women and children.

An essay on '*Gender and Governance*' which was edited by *Martha Nussbaum, Niraja Gopal Jayal, Amrita Basu and Yasmin Tambiah* in 2003 as a part of UNDP project emphasised extensively on the idea of

¹ Quoted in Jayal, 2006. The practical Gender needs refers to the immediate perceived necessities of women and Strategic Gender needs refers to those needs that has the potential to transform fundamental gender relations by challenging the subordination of women.

'Gender' in the governance discourse and also the impact of Gender inequality on Governance. The paper contains an extensive analysis of the different ways in which women have been transforming the process of governance through their participation in Political institutions which is not essentially 'Private' in a traditional sense of Public- Private distinction. They were of the opinion that while affirmative action policies in Governance as provided by 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts of the Indian Constitution has definitely resulted in an upsurge of women and members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes at the level of Local and Urban Governance. But, while Participation is obviously contingent upon representation, it would be a mistake to see representation as an end in itself.

According to *Sudha Pai*, Pradhanis elected to Panchayats in Meerut districts are all Dalit women, an evident impact of reservation brought about by 73rd amendment. Their husbands took all major official decisions on behalf of them and they merely affixed their signatures on the paper. However, the mere fact of being elected to the post of Pradhan did provoke realisation among them about the importance of acquiring education or at least literary skills. This is called '*Proto empowerment*'² and needs to be taken seriously.

RESEARCH GAP

The research gap that I have deduced from the review of literature suggests that Participation of women in local government is not crucially an active process until they have the ability and interest to actively work in line with the preferences and concern of women. Only this will ensure a real 'Politics of Presence'³ for women representatives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The paper will look at the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of political quotas in PRIs on the participation of women representatives?
2. What is the impact of institutional design and social structure on the participatory functions of women representatives?

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the analysis of secondary sources. The dataset that I have analyzed has been taken from '*A Study of EWRs in Panchayati Raj Institutions*' conducted by AC-Nielsen ORG-MARG, at the instance of Ministry of Panchayati Raj in 2008. It was a comprehensive all India study which provided widely generalisable conclusions. Attempts have been made to extrapolate from existing study to highlight the trends. Further, theoretical inferences based on analysis have also been stated.

It was a comprehensive all- India study which included all states except States where Panchayats are not in existence and elections have not yet taken place were not included such as Jharkhand, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Jammu and Kashmir. 114 districts, 228 blocks and 1368 Gram Panchayats from 23 States were

² Pai, 1999

³ Coined by Ann Phillips. The term 'Politics of Presence' implies that merely sharing the same identity and behavior as the represented group is not sufficient for the representative. This will require substantively acting in the interest of women.

covered. Gram Panchayats were chosen from each block on random basis. This included four female headed Panchayats and two male headed Panchayats. The total community members were 20,184.

PARTICIPATION OF ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES (EWRs)

The social profile of the respondents were as follows. 73% of elected representatives who were interviewed were women and 27 % were men. 41% of respondents were within the age group of 21-35 years. A large proportion of respondents belonged to disadvantaged sections of society. This was distributed as SC elected representatives were 28%, ST representatives were 13% and 1/3rd of elected representatives were OBCs. This distribution was seen in line with the reservation. Since reservation mandated their entry into political space, 89.2 % of women representatives did not face any constraints in filling nomination. The reason would have been that they would have contested from reserved seats and that their male counterparts would have taken care of all potential challenges.

90% of elected representatives were first timers in Panchayat offices and within that a major proportion consisted of women representatives. 86% EWRs were first timers in politics as against 17% EMRs. 43% of EWRs were from reserved seats. Reservation was a determining factor in representation of women. It helped them to demonstrate their political caliber and articulate and create their own political space.

The re-electability of women representatives was discussed against reservation. When the ex-elected women representatives were interviewed. 89% of them did not contest election next time. 45% of them cited that Panchayat work was unsuitable for women and also considered themselves incompetent in executing their responsibilities. The boundaries between public and private sphere is definitely permeated by elected women representatives when they enter into political arena, mostly through mandatory quotas. But they soon retreat back into the private sphere because the rules that drives the public sphere are more male dominated.⁴ They need more time for child bearing/rearing and household works than what their political career permits.

62 % of EWRs responded that amount of time devoted to household work remained same. They do not conceive themselves as ineffective leaders. They found it difficult to perform both domestic and professional responsibilities. The gendered division of family creates barriers against women in all spheres of life.

De-reservation of seats could also be one of the important reasons. Rotation of terms in Panchayats were one of institutional constraints which limits the participation of women. While 30% of elected representatives considered spouse as motivating factor in contesting election and the same proportion considered husbands as inhibiting factor their participation in politics. This could be understood in the context of proxy representation which is understood as male presumed dominance in political sphere. It is usually the male representatives who calls the shots from behind the scene and the women representatives merely affixed the signatures on paper.

Their performance of elected women representatives in Panchayat Offices is based on the knowledge of laws and rules and awareness of powers and responsibilities. The Capacity Building Training (CBTs) is crucial in improving ability of EWRs performance. 65 % of EMRs secured training as against 54 % of EWRs. Training is usually imparted on laws and rules. While training on planning and budgeting was recorded by small proportion.

⁴ UNDP Report, 2004 on Gender and Governance.

ANALYSIS

The representation was not merely a sufficient condition for participation of women. The most important indices of participation are Attendance in Gram Sabha meeting, Participation in Panchayat work, Participation in Standing Committees. I have tried to analyse the participation along these indices.

The quality of participation in Gram Panchayat was determined by a number of Gram Sabha meetings. The Gram Sabha discusses developmental needs and priorities of local village communities and are generally involved in preparation of village development plan. The participation in Gram Sabha meetings was confirmed by 93 % of male Pradhans/Mukhiyas as against 86 % of female pradhans/Mukhiyas. 73.5 % of EMRs responded as having organised and attended Gram Sabha meetings. The gender gap was more significant in case of ward members. 77 % of male ward members reported having attended such meetings as against 60 % of female Ward members.

63 % of elected representatives reported less than 25 % of female participation in Gram Sabha meetings. They were not able to create an enabling environment for women to participate and deliberate upon issues of local importance. Caste and gender could be major intervening factor. For women, mobility factor could be one of the reasons as they cannot venture out freely for attending the meetings. Also they are burdened by multiple responsibilities which leaves little time for them to enter into political space.

For women from disadvantaged sections, participation in Gram Sabha meetings could be difficult when they were organised in upper caste hamlets because they cannot dare entering those areas freely. Also, since most of them were landless agricultural labourers, they cannot afford losing a day's wage by participating in meetings. The absence of 'Critical Mass'⁵ of female representation also reduces their bargaining and negotiating powers and this gender gap sometimes gets reflected in the policy formulation.

Quorum is the minimum number of votes requires convening Gram Sabha meetings. This varies across states. In Bihar, it is 1/3rd of total number of household. If the quorum is not fulfilled the meeting is adjourned and quorum is waived but not bypassed for next meetings. 73 % of elected representatives reported that quorum was formed at Gram Sabha meetings. Within that gender gap was slightly more noticeable due to the fact that 57.2% of EWRs reported that quorum was formed for meetings as against 73.5 % of EMRs. There could be a possibility that meetings were called by bypassing the quorum which also includes the votes of female members. Most of the time the female members were not aware of such meetings and hence, could not attend it. Rather than accepting the female representatives as equal counterparts, they are co-opted in male centric political sphere. They were allowed to function only as long as power is concentrated in the hands of male representatives. They face backlash when they start deliberating on 'Strategic Gender Interests'⁶ and question the existing status-quo enjoyed by a massive chunk of male representatives.

Another important facet of participation was elected representatives' interaction with local officials as intermediaries between people and government. The gender disparity is more significant here as only 31.8 % of EWRs reported having interacted with members of local bureaucracy as compared to 54.3 % of EMRs.

⁵ The Critical mass theory refers to the relation between the percentage of women legislators and framing of legislation having an evident impact on women themselves.

⁶ Quoted in Jayal,2006

31.7 % of female representatives reported having interacted with police as against 44.5 % of male representatives. The male representatives emerged as more proactive members in their interaction with local officials. Mostly the female representatives lack confidence and they were also intimidated by slanderous allegations against men.

The participation in redressal of local issues was an important index of participation of elected members in functioning of Panchayati Raj. As representatives at the local level, they were required to address local issues which needs signing petition to demand from state government or organising protests. Viewed from a gender prism the study reported considerable gender differences with only 20 % of women representatives confirmed being part of any such initiatives as against 35 % of male representatives. More Pradhans/Mukhiyas than ward members were active in such initiatives. When male representatives are usually hesitant to speak in front of officials, women representatives are naturally more guarded. The final decision making power actually rests with the bureaucracy and the Panchayats is meant to only offer suggestions regarding the beneficiaries for various schemes

There are not much variations in the participation of elected representatives in health related campaigns. 42.6 % of EWRs participated in it as compared to 46.6 % of EMRs. Elected representatives were also required to increase access to education by increasing enrollment rate, reducing dropout rate and creating awareness about education. 62.3 % of EWRs were involved in such initiatives as against 74.3 % of EMRs. The study did not suggest any attempt by elected women representatives to invest more in the female centric schemes and thus there is no difference in policy preferences of elected women representatives or elected men representatives.

Table 1. ALLOCATION OF FUNDS

| Focus area | Percentage of fund allocated (GDP) 2019-2020 |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Roads | 45.24 |
| Drinking Water | 6.82 |
| Health and Sanitation | 10.52 |
| Education | 2.51 |
| Women and child development | 1.23 |
| Poverty Allocation | 0.18 |
| Family Welfare | 0.15 |
| Welfare of Weaker Sections | 0.14 |

Source: PRIA Research

Even if representation has increased and the EWRs have been entrusted with more power and resources, what remained important is the gap in the allocation of funds. The funds are directed towards infrastructural developments such as building roads and toilets. There is a declining trend in allocation of budget to soft development issues.⁷ This is important in understanding the effectiveness of women as leaders and agents of change. While state has definitely paved the way to strengthen participation by increasing the quotas to 50% in many states but lower allocation to women and child development and other soft issues will have a direct impact on addressing the specific developmental challenges of women and children in rural India.

⁷ PRIA research

In a response to parliament question on deficiencies in functioning of PRIs in August 2018, the Minister of State for Panchayati Raj, Purshottam Rupla responded that PRIs are grappling with inadequate devolution of powers, manpower constraints, poor capacities of elected representatives and functionaries, lack of basic infrastructure in Panchayat offices, social inequalities and lack of transparency.

If reservation are rotated every five years, there is little incentive for women representatives elected on reserved seats to perform. This is because next time when she will contest, she will not have benefit of reservation in the same seat. Also, Reservations in Panchayats for women and disadvantaged sections is not much effective in case of decision making by consensus. They dare not raise their voice against the majority voices and their demands remained isolated. Thus, it is easier for situations of elite capture.

The role of Standing Committees was the preparation of Gram Panchayat development plan and execution of schemes within budgetary provisions. It plays an important role in the implementation of various schemes. Thus, assessment of participation in standing committees with respect to elected women representatives was an important probe of the study. 78 % of EWRs were members of such Standing Committees as compared to 64 % of EMRs and more than 90 % of elected representatives confirmed participating and expressing opinions in standing committees' meetings. A sizeable proportion of elected representatives reported being members of educational Standing Committees.

Table -2. EMPOWERMENT AMONG WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES AFTER RESERVATION

| | EWRs | EMRs |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|
| IMPROVEMENT IN SELF-ESTEEM | 77 | 82.9 |
| RESPECT WITHIN HOUSEHOLD | 64.9 | 74.0 |
| MORE SAY IN DECISION MAKING ABILITIES | 69.8 | 83.9 |
| RESPECT AMONG VILLAGERS | 79.0 | 88.3 |

Source: (MoPR Study: 2008)

TABLE 3. POST-ELECTION ROLE CONFLICT AMONG WOMEN

| ROLE CONFLICT | HARYAN A | HIMACHAL PRADESH | KERA LA | ODISH A | UTTAR PRADESH | MAHARAS HTRA |
|---------------|----------|------------------|---------|---------|---------------|--------------|
| Yes | 38.2 | 12.7 | 57.7 | 7.3 | 12.1 | 27.1 |
| No | 61.0 | 87.3 | 42.3 | 91.1 | 87.9 | 72.9 |
| NA | 0.8 | - | - | 1.6 | - | - |

Source: PRIA research

While the MoPR study showed slight gender gap in increase in confidence and status among women representatives and suggested increase in the status among EWRs but table 3. which is based on multi-state study reflected considerable differences in the perception of role-conflict among women representatives. Thus, where patriarchal and caste structures are less stringent, women were able to perform their roles and responsibilities and hence could witness an increase in status among community members. Their role conflict

in both domestic and public sphere will happen only when they will perform their responsibilities that has been entrusted in them. This is recorded in case of Kerala and Himachal Pradesh.

THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF PARTICIPATION OF ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES

Now, I have tried to understand the analysis from the vantage point of public- private dichotomy.

The 73rd Amendment certainly created a political space for women representatives to articulate their political concerns and interests. The MoPR (2008) study suggested a significant increase not only in representation but also in participation in political sphere. Though the perceived gender gap between men and women has not been reflected in policy formulation. This was evident from women and elected male representatives' participation in health and education related campaigns and formulation of policies. But the Minister of State response to a starred question on Panchayati Raj definitely suggested multiple constraints. And this has also been corroborated by PRIA study on Panchayats which suggested that allocation of funds to Practical Gender issues has reduced over the years. On the other hand, there has also been a considerable gender gap in women's participation in Gram Sabha, their interaction with bureaucracies and their participation in redressal of local issues has also not been very encouraging.

While a women's socio-economic status definitely influences their participation in Politics, the role impact of women's position in domestic household cannot be ignored. This implies that when a woman owns the decision making power in her personal household, she can easily venture out and make a place for herself in the public sphere which is presumably male-dominated.

The respondent's demographic characteristics, the educational level of respondent, their family income, caste has direct bearing on their political participation which is dependent variable. The study also points out the critical role of caste and attitude of women towards social issues. Upper caste women are likely to be more conservative and has conformist attitude. Low caste women on the other hand are more socially mobile yet backlash from upper caste male representatives worked against their full-fledged participation.

The MoPR (2008) study yielded interesting pattern that the variable with largest impact on respondent's knowledge of amendment was whether someone in family contested election. Women's socialisation was important in determining whether they contested or not. What is more surprising is that women are aware of the advantages that politics brings but are still not politically active. This is because they have internalized their non-political positions.

The personal is political debate can be contextualised to understand this trend. The dynamics within a family itself which is the private sphere also involves issues of power. Looking after the children and taking care of the family are amongst the multiple responsibilities of women representatives in domestic sphere due to gendered division of labour. And, this has an obvious bearing on their limited opportunities in public sphere. For *Susan M. Okin*, Gender refers to social institutionalization of sexual differences.⁸ Private refers to sphere where interference with freedom requires justification. Public refers to the sphere which is more accessible with constant intrusion. In a dichotomous sense of domestic and non-domestic life, the state alludes to public while family and domestic life refers to private. There is a problem within this dichotomous division of labor

⁸ Okin,1989

between sexes. On one hand men are supposed to be preoccupied with production related and political matters while private refers to dominated sphere relating to reproduction and are unsuited for public roles. *Ortner* argues that the subordination of female is based on *biological determinism*.⁹ Women are symbolically associated with nature because of their physiological roles and men with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and dominate nature. Men find it natural to subordinate women.

There is a politicisation of the personal which contributes to the personal-political/private-public divide. What happens between two sexes in personal sphere is not immune from power dynamic which is the distinct feature of public. The gendered public sphere can be understood in the sense of perceived domestic responsibility of female as child-bearers and care-takers and male's duty as bread winners. Until the gendered structure in family is challenged, there cannot be equality in both public and private sphere.

CONCLUSION

The political reservations for women in Panchayati Raj mandated by 73rd Amendment Act is definitely a necessary but not sufficient condition to facilitate participation in Panchayati Raj. It is thus reasonable to expect some robust changes. First, The large section of women representatives has middle or secondary education Thus, Non-formal training should be given to them. This will ensure that women representatives will take up political responsibilities more actively. Second, Women representatives should organise other women into Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Mahila Mandals to strengthen their capacity for decision making. Third, There is also a need to put in place a strong institutional mechanism to look after the grievances of women representatives. Fourth, Besides Quotas there is also a need for attitudinal change in society towards women and patriarchal structure can be altered.

To conclude, it can be said that the reservation for women can be an important impetus to women's empowerment in India at village level but that it is not a guarantee for the participation of the elected women. The goal of women's empowerment will not be accomplished by reservations alone as there are more restraining than facilitating factors for the entry and participation of women in political arena. Steps are being taken to overcome the restraining factors that inhibits women representatives' full-fledged participation in Politics. But definitely a structure which has been created over centuries cannot be dismantled within a short span of time.

To expedite the process it is essential to implement some supplementary policies which encourage the self-confidence of women and build their capabilities. The political and social environment shall be created which will enable women representatives to acquire awareness, experience and confidence to become responsive to the needs of other women and articulate it.

While it cannot be claimed that women are categorically empowered though these reservations, it cannot be denied that they have gained a certain extent of authority and confidence as a direct outcome of the quota. In this respect it appears that the quotas are a feasible tool for the political empowerment of women.

⁹ Ortner, 1974

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