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WOMEN IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES :

ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES



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Marginalization of Rural Women in Decentralisation of Power

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We say woman as '*Sarwati*', but more illiterate women are. We say woman as '*Durga*', but more prone to violence women are. We say woman as '*Lakshmi*', but financially she is dependent. Culturally her position is as '*Goddess*', but she is discriminated at her home only. She is victim of double blind theory-Culturally and socially she has made herself as committed towards family and she herself is not ready to come out.

Women & Society -

Theoretically, wives are befittingly called 'Ardhangani' (better-half). They are given not only important but equal position with men. Married men along with their wives are allowed to perform sacred rites on the occasion of various important festivals. Our Culture says- *where women are honoured there reside the gods*. Religious act can not be performed with perfection by a man without the participation of his wife. Thus Though woman enjoys the theoretical importance, in practice she has a subservient position than man. All these lead us to conclude that the women should look down upon domestic life. Nevertheless India is still a male dominated society, where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men. This gender bias is the cause women lacking in social and political life.

Women & Political Arena at local level-

With a woman President and Prime Minister i.e. as head of government and several women in top positions in politics, governance and media, the presence of women in politics has become more conspicuous in India with these public and successful women, one can easily lose sight of how much still has to be done in political everyday life - especially when it comes to local affairs.

For local affairs, **Decentralisation** is a form of governance. **Decentralisation** transfers political decision-making to the regional and local level. People expect decentralisation to foster more and broader political participation of citizens in local and regional development processes as well as providing better answers to their needs. In India, decentralisation is also justified by the argument that on the grounds of allocative efficiency, enhanced responsiveness and effectiveness, it helps poverty reduction. In theory, citizens have more control over decisions taken at local level, and actions will reflect their needs and preferences better.

Women are intelligent, hard-working and efficient in work. They put heart and soul together in whatever they undertake. Women's contributions in politics and

social services have also been quite significant. So Decentralisation raises expectations for increased participation in decision-making by women. Despite these expectations, women are still underrepresented. Women frequently belong to the marginalised groups of society. Actually, they are not only excluded from citizenship and rights, but their interests and concerns in public decisions and public services are not reflected in political decision-making. The lack of democracy in gender relations excludes them from participating in governance. As already underlined in the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, women in rural areas are more discriminated and marginalised than other women. It is voiceless group as Traditions and cultures as well as religions very often hinder women's access to power. Because of traditions and perceptions of women's role in society, the population do not give women the rights they are entitled to. Here, there is still a long way to go. Women are not fully aware of the measures adopted by the state for their upliftment and even if aware they do not use them because of the old social values that are still persisting. These traditions and values inhibit them to take any revolutionary steps. Decentralisation per se does not remove the barriers that have all along disempowered women in India and denied them the ability to realise their potential and enjoy their rights. These barriers include:

- customary and cultural practices;
- ignorance and lack of education;
- discriminatory and inadequate laws;
- lack of economic independence;
- religious misinterpretation.
- **Women equality is not universal**
- **Unaware of their legal status**
- The government has been reluctant to translate the constitutional spirit into appropriate laws and policies for promotion;
- lack of political will to properly implement the laws laid down and legislation;
- societal barriers and norms regarding gender and women's leadership;
- limited political skills and experience of women;
- inadequacy between resources and responsibility at local level;
- lack of support or interests of political parties in women's leadership;
- weak national systems that do not promote accountability to gender equality and

representation of women.

Culturally, women are not perceived to have a role to play in politics. They are expected to be home-makers and to stay in their homes. The societal attitude towards women undermines their confidence to come out and engage in politics. Likewise, the stereotyping that women are not meant to be in politics prevents women from electing fellow women to these positions of power. There is no moral support for women candidates.

The widely-held view that politics is "dirty" and therefore not good for decent women is also a barrier. Husbands and families are reluctant to have their women in the public eye, while at the same time, women fear mudslinging and intimidation and harassment characteristic of political campaigns.

Ignorance and lack of education is a very big constraint to women's empowerment within the local government structures. Even those who dare and find themselves in governance positions cannot debate effectively because of the inability to read and understand the documents, such as policy budget statements. They lack skills of public speaking. Exclusion mechanisms are closely linked to a socially and culturally established division of roles and labour between women and men but are also caused by unequal access to economic and financial resources. So women are frequently marginalised in politics.¹

Tokenism and Surrogate Representation.

The exclusion of women representatives from effective decision-making in panchayat institutions has been repeatedly documented. Indeed, several studies have concluded that women representation as token. There is indeed plenty of evidence of surrogate or proxy representation by husbands and other male relatives who not only canvass for their women, but also receive notices of and attend meetings in their place. In majority cases, they are from the families of dominant male leaders of the village. They do not participate in activities of the panchayats.

The choice of candidates is controlled by a political party. The party leadership decides candidates and manipulate election process. Marginalised groups are being excluded from political processes and representation. The followers of party or dominant groups from reserved quota are chosen as candidates. During elections, political leaders may proclaim that they will bring development and justice to the people, but all too often these remain empty promises which they do not intend to honour. In this situation, democracy faces a crisis.

Majority of the elected representatives are of view that the gram panchayat's plans are generally prepared by the dominant leaders, sarpanches, panchayat secretaries and the higher officials. The elected members are not taken into confidence in decision making and all the decisions are taken by the above mentioned people. The rural scenario reflects that the participation of women particularly illiterates is nominal or for 'namesake'. Some members of the Gram Panchayat and upper PRIs feel

hesitation in speaking at meetings. Their views & suggestions are not seriously heard or considered.

This large section of the Society, is getting marginalized and cut off from the decision making process. In the efforts to cater to the interests of the big players like power elites, the rural women find themselves sidelined. State government also does not consider the decisions at grass root level, so in India, Surrogate Representation is there by rural women population. It is for namesake.

Local elites have introduced new solution on decentralisation of power. i.e. Jugaad mode of representatives in Local Self Governments. As Indian politics is on mode of political market, elites invests money for some individuals who are only for name sake. Representatives are resources of elites income.²

Local leadership by the women in Rural Areas

Decentralisation of power through Panchayati Raj is an important opportunity to foster women's leadership. There are many opportunities for the transfer of decision-making powers to women at local level. These include women being very active in their households and in their communities. They have a solid understanding of local issues and in one way or the other are helping to address them. The needs that women and their families face everyday can be practically met through local leadership. Women are involved in grassroots development activities, which build their confidence in the capacity to address local issues. And last but not least, local politics is less complex and local elections are less expensive, less confrontational and less aggressive for women.

Results from Rural Areas

It was reported by Bardhan Pranab that about 80-90 per cent of women, particularly from the lower income group, attend the Panchayati Raj Institutions meeting regularly. Women are responsible for changing the work culture in Panchayati Raj Institutions and in articulating issues related to women.

Decentralised governments have more and better information regarding their constituents and are able to enforce and coordinate policies and programmes more efficiently³

Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2001) found that the women leaders of village councils concentrate more on developing infrastructure that is relevant to the needs of the rural women (drinking water, fuel and roads). The power of the weaker sections over resources has increased through empowerment via decentralisation. Studies have also pointed out that reservation has improved the perception levels of women and has created an urge in them to participate in the governance. Similar observations were recorded regarding women from disadvantaged groups such as the SC, ST & OBCs.⁴

Arunoday Bajpai in his article "Representation of women in Local Bodies in India: Social Cultural Constraints" mainly focuses on roles and powers of women from marginalised sections of community have not been effective due to double jeopardy: as a women

& women from marginalised sections. He adds further that women must be motivated by giving opportunities, identifying ability, creating awareness and developing organising capacity at grass root levels. 5

At grass root level women are away from political participation because-

Women representatives have some obstacles in representation:

- Illiteracy and low education levels of the majority of the women elected to the PRIs.
- Overburdened with family responsibilities.
- Introversion due to the lack of communication skills.
- Poor socio-economic background with which the women have come into the system and poor capacity building.
- Male family members and also leaders from the caste group/community come in the way of the affairs of the Panchayats.
- Indifferent attitude and behavior of officials working in the system.
- Misguidance by the local bureaucracy.
- Mounting pressure from the political party which has vested interests in the gender reservation for positions in the PRI system.
- Women were branded as 'incompetent' in the eyes of villagers.
- Widespread use of corrupt practices among the male members and local bureaucrats.
- Women have more working hours than men not only because of the double burden but especially also due to the type of work they do.
- Women do not have equal access to training;

PRIs are seen weaker because till we have not given attention towards **Human Development** (health, education, sanitation), **Local Economic Development** (agriculture and allied sectors, traditional industries), **poverty reduction, social justice, a priority for women empowerment and Social Security** through decentralisation are wide away from achievement of the target. So women leadership is marginalised.

For name sake, we do all these things and say "Oh, we have decentralised the power", Actually bringing bottom lined women in the mainstream of development is the priority today's world.

After 20 years, the scenario is hopeful, but expects certain modifications in functional side of operation. So after long period of applicability, as the part of discussion, it is not on examining the success, but strengthening again by knowing the weaknesses of present grass root level local self government and identifying lacunae which are still there in spite of its constitutionalisation through the historical 73rd constitutional Amendment. The empowerment of women through a well conceived system of reservation has brought about a change in the socio-political culture of those sections of society and has

also led to a virtual transformation of the rural scene where people have not increasingly aware of their rights but have also started demanding share in power. The stark reality, however, is that instances of initiatives and support to what may be called **Decentralisation** have also been found to be short-ranged and half-hearted.

The family, community and the state (represented by the officials) have together created a situation wherein elected women representatives are facing many operational constraints while playing their roles and discharging their functions in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. Unfortunately, the expectations from women representation have remained largely unfulfilled. The journey of *Panchayati Raj* in India over the last decade has been extremely complex, slowed by institutional and bureaucratic resistance, lack of political will and support, lack of awareness and capacities at grassroots, inadequate finances and the continuing unequal and non-democratic socio-political organisation of rural society.

Strategies to strengthen Participation of Women in Local Self Governments:

- Continuous sensitisation of political parties to see women's participation in leadership as an asset.
- Sensitise women to take up the challenge of getting into leadership positions in decentralised structures.
- Organise trainings and capacity building sessions for women to get the required capacity to access leadership positions.
- networking and supporting women from various government and non-government Organisations to carry out the above activities.
- Equal opportunity of political participation of women

Half of the part of society is composed of women. So equal share should be given to women. If from a village 7 seats are there in village Panchayat-7 seats should be for women and 7 seats for men. If 75 Seats are there in Zilha Parishad, 75 seats should be for women and 75 seats for men. i.e. For each Constituency (Gan) ONE male and ONE female Representative, which is justice for representation. There is no need of reservation. It should be followed for state assembly and in Parliament. i.e. 547 seats should be for women and 547 seats for men. Then there will be no marginalisation.

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