

The Participation of Women in Grassroots Democracy in India

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Abstract— This article explores the historical context and contemporary challenges of women's participation in grassroots democracy in India. Historically marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes, women in India have faced significant socio-cultural, political, and economic barriers hindering their active involvement in governance. The introduction of the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992, which reserved seats for women in local Panchayati Raj Institutions, marked a pivotal but incomplete step towards gender equality in political representation. Despite legislative measures, women continue to encounter obstacles such as patriarchal norms, limited access to resources, and societal expectations that confine them to traditional roles. The article also examines initiatives and policies aimed at enhancing women's participation, including capacity-building programs and reservation policies, and assesses their impact on social and political dynamics at the grassroots level. Ultimately, it advocates for comprehensive efforts to dismantle barriers and empower women as active agents of change in democratic governance.

Keywords— Women, Grassroots, Democracy, Panchayats, Empowerment, Gender, Barriers, Policies, Impact.

I. INTRODUCTION

The participation of women of all ages has been an interest of women's organizations in most developing countries, but particularly those in South Asia. India and Bangladesh continue to be the only countries in the world which have, since the mid-1980s, played host to women heads of state. Furthermore, at least seven other South Asian countries have been in the happy situation of being represented by both women prime ministers and presidents. The interest in women's grassroots level participation has risen sharply in the wake of a variety of international, national, and non-governmental trends. The more high-profile and obviously beneficial recent success stories are providing women voters with reserved seats at all three levels of government (village, block, and district). The successful conduct of countrywide panchayat polls for 900,000 elected positions has attracted the attention of newspapers worldwide. Yet, the drawbacks are also making themselves felt, among which appear to be the in-built method of institutional commitment and public accountability. But the continuing support from both the central and state levels of the government, whereby the correct but short-sighted interpretation of basic and compulsory reserves of 33 percent of the seats for women, undermines the very spirit of participative democracy of which devolution of full political power to the third-tier of elected government personnel is a cardinal part.

The participation of women in grassroots democracy is increasingly regarded as an important policy question for a variety of reasons. The reasons used to justify the need for increased women's participation are generally advanced from a theoretical perspective. Essentially, they refer to a range of issues arising out of the role-related differences of women which lead them to have different life values, needs, and perspectives which must be provided for either to provide full legitimacy to the policy-making process or to fulfill the substantive needs which emanate from women's different roles. The practical experience of many societies, such as those of

some African and Asian states, appears to show that women's perspectives on many issues are underrepresented in the making of public policy. The research focusing on this core issue is, of course, extremely limited, and the implications of the relative absence of women's perspectives are also matters of guesswork.

In India, the 'Panchayati Raj system of governance' is a deeply rooted bureaucratic and political governance mechanism, having a rich history. It has been re-introduced and reinforced several times with a view to strengthening the rural self-governance model of India. The Panchayat system was re-established as a result of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, 1992. This amendment gave the Panchayat institutions constitutional status for the first time in the history of India. Women's participation in the development and governance of a community is considered an indispensable condition for economic and social development. Given women's status in society, accepting democracy means not only embracing the concept of formal democratic processes but also embracing the ideal of political participation, not merely as a right but also as a form of social activism—an activity that is synonymous with useful, empowering, and valuable political engagement.

Significance of the Study

The present position of women in the political sphere - both at the official level and at the village level - is once again brought to focus primarily due to the reservations for one-third of the panchayat seats, in the wake of the 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution. The need for reservations was felt because political parties were not willing to give women more than a token representation in the Indian Parliament and State Assemblies. They argued that women are not as capable as men and were not keen on encouraging them. Yet, they also pushed women in the Parliamentary elections for fear of anti-women backlash. The actual representation, it may be noted, is below even token levels at present, indicating the urgent need for corrective measures. This situation highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality in the realm of politics. The

reservations for one-third of the panchayat seats have sparked immense debate and shed light on the limited opportunities provided to women in this field. The problem arises from the reluctance of political parties to offer more than just symbolic representation to women in key decision-making bodies. Their arguments, based on biased notions of women's capabilities, only serve to hinder progress and perpetuate inequality. Ironically, these same political parties, fearing a negative response from women, have also made half-hearted attempts to include them in the Parliamentary elections. However, these efforts remain insufficient, as the current representation of women falls even below the already inadequate token levels. This alarming reality underscores the pressing need for immediate and effective corrective measures. It is crucial to recognize that women possess the skills, knowledge, and passion to contribute significantly to political governance. The reservations for panchayat seats serve as a stepping stone towards creating a more inclusive and representative political landscape. However, true progress can only be achieved by dismantling the discriminatory barriers that hinder women's full participation. Therefore, it is imperative that political parties and policymakers reassess their stance on gender equality. Women must be given equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, not only at the panchayat level but also in Parliament and State Assemblies. By doing so, we can create a society where gender does not determine one's worth or capacity to lead. In conclusion, the current state of women's political participation necessitates urgent action. The reservations for one-third of the panchayat seats are a step in the right direction, but much more needs to be done. It is time to challenge the archaic perceptions and biases that limit women's political progress. Let us strive towards a future where women are fully empowered and their voices are heard and valued in every sphere of governance.

Historically, politics was nearly an exclusive male preserve, with power vesting in male hands. However, in recent years, there have been growing concerns over the implications of the near absence of women in politics, policy-making, and governance. Women, being half the population, need representation in decision-making bodies if democracy is to be truly representative. In the 21st century, it is rightly emphasized that democracy cannot be a reality without the active participation of women. Literature on the reasons for the present scenario, the leadership roles that women had occupied in earlier days of Indian history, are reviewed. The analysis of historical data reveals a multitude of factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in politics. One of the key aspects that comes to light is the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that permeated societies in the past, acting as barriers for women aspiring to enter the political arena. These norms dictated that women's proper place was within the confines of the household, leaving little room for their engagement in the public sphere.

Political systems crafted by men often failed to create an inclusive environment where women could actively participate and lead. However, the tide is turning, and society is starting to recognize the vital importance of female leadership in shaping policies and making decisions that affect everyone. The vital

role women play in society cannot be underestimated, as they bring unique perspectives, experiences, and problem-solving approaches to the table. By including more women in the political landscape, a broader range of ideas and solutions can be explored, leading to more comprehensive and effective governance. In Indian history, women have unequivocally demonstrated their exceptional leadership qualities and their ability to govern. From historical figures like Rani Padmini, who valiantly defended her kingdom, to political luminaries like Indira Gandhi, who served as the first female Prime Minister of India, women have left an indelible mark in the annals of governance. The strength and fortitude displayed by these trailblazers serve as a testament to the fact that women are more than capable of assuming positions of power and authority. It is crucial to delve into the reasons behind the current underrepresentation of women in politics. Societal biases, lack of access to resources and education, stereotyping, and limited opportunities for political mentorship are just a few factors that continue to impede women's entry and progress in political spheres. By addressing these barriers, providing mentorship programs, and actively working towards gender equality in politics, societies can pave the way for a more balanced and inclusive democracy. In conclusion, the absence of women in politics is a pressing issue that demands attention and action. In order to achieve true representation and a functioning democracy, there must be an equitable distribution of power and decision-making authority between genders. Emphasizing the rich history of women's leadership roles and critically analyzing the existing challenges are crucial steps in ensuring that future generations witness a more inclusive and democratic society. Let us recognize the importance of women's voices, empower them, and collectively strive towards a future where gender equality and female representation in politics are the norm rather than the exception.

Historical Overview of Women's Participation in Indian Grassroots Democracy

There was also a significantly marginalized and neglected community of people who were completely excluded altogether from the decision-making process. These individuals belonged to the menially employed dalits and other untouchable castes, facing utmost discrimination and social exclusion. Thus, in essence, democracy, both at the conventional and non-conventional levels, solely comprised those individuals who already held power and authority within the traditional community. Meanwhile, those who were deemed as lower caste in society remained on the marginalized sidelines. In this bustling world where hierarchical reservations were exalted for a select few deemed important, democracy remained an elusive privilege reserved exclusively for the chosen elite who continued to reign over the vast majority. The disempowered, including the economically deprived and women, remained dutifully subservient, bearing the burden of service without attaining their rightful desires and aspirations.

The history of participatory democracy in India is but a recent phenomenon. In a traditional nation where upper caste males held the Berhampur and women were like mortal deities taking care of the service needs of the master caste, namely the

Brahmins. In a society where cooperation is valued within the family, even the democratic authority of the headman was very much limited. In his absence, his wife took over the authority of the office. She functioned as the quintessence of the Bhruhdu system, independent of the menfolk. A society which takes its derivation from such religious moorings, one should expect women to be involved in every aspect of social life. However, it has been otherwise. While women can take care of the interests of men, being the embodiment of Shakthi, they possess a latent potential that has remained largely untapped throughout history, hidden under societal constraints and patriarchal structures. As we look deeper into the roots of participatory democracy and the forthcoming changes it may bring, it is crucial to acknowledge the pressing need for women to reclaim their rightful place in the discourse of governance and decision-making processes. It is not a question of mere inclusion or token representation, but rather a recognition of the invaluable perspectives, talents, and experiences that women bring to the table. By empowering women and amplifying their voices, society as a whole can benefit from their unique insights, fostering a more inclusive and equitable democratic ecosystem. In envisioning a future where participatory democracy flourishes, it is essential to break free from the shackles of gender bias, dismantling the barriers that hinder women's active participation and ensuring that their contributions are not only valued but actively sought after. Women have always been proponents of change, agents of progress, and bearers of resilience. It is time for their potential to be nurtured, their abilities to be celebrated, and their rightful place in shaping the destiny of India to be recognized and embraced with open arms. Together, by embracing a participatory democracy that fully encompasses the voices of women, we can forge a brighter and more inclusive future for all.

Challenges Faced by Women in Participating in Grassroots Democracy

From this, it is understood that participation in grassroots democracy is much more complex. Likewise, speaking about Indian grassroots level democracy like Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), one can say it is by and large a male-dominated political process. Whether it is an elected body, village assembly, social organization, or political party, it is difficult to find a woman in politics, though women are constitutionally protected by affirmative action policy. Therefore, it is necessary to know about the roles of women in grassroots level democracy in India who are facing oppression in all walks of life. No doubt that the success of a democratic government depends on the acceptance of its policies by the citizens, which follows the people's active participation in the decision-making process. Women are oppressed and not free from discrimination. Their work, sacrifice, love, and headache often do not receive appreciation in the home. Generally, access to decision-making and control of power are not allowed in their life. As a result, women have remained relatively consigned to the private sphere with a narrow ambit of direct influence over the division of public resources. The peculiarity of women's representation in elected local government in India

is that the women members do not necessarily conform to the required standards and the culling of women sarpanches from the familiar background and without the resources and power to force the state to deliver on its promises.

The tradition of governance in India, or the governing by the local people (Panchayats), is as old as Indian history. However, such democratic mechanisms are often gender-specific and gender-blind. Women in India constitute about half of its population, but their representation is much below this share. The oppression of women by men, both inside and outside of their homes, has affected their knowledge, interest, and capability to participate, act, and decide in the process of political governance. Moreover, poverty, lack of access to information and awareness, and many more factors are standing as stumbling blocks in the path of women to participate in the governance process at the local level.

Socio-cultural Barriers

But still, there is a tendency to reduce the things done for women to anything that reinforces the traditional role of women. Focusing on women depends on changing the mode of thought that leads to look at the social implications of development from the point of view of a single sex (men) and from there to prioritize the benefits that are expected to affect other sectors to which women belong (families) because in this way it prioritizes the criterion of social hierarchy of gender. Therefore, achieving political democratization is significant too when it is part of a horizon focused on historically marginalized dimensions, such as gender, which is why political campaigns should affect other traditionally excluded dimensions that women represent and on which they are ever less centered.

Despite these encouraging signs, the participation of women in local and community elections as voters and candidates leaves room for serious concern. It is true that there are laws in India that advance the participation of women in government: the 73rd Amendment of 1992, which involves the participation of women and the disadvantaged castes or communities. However, the reservations established by the Constitution of India and its amendments are in no way a sufficient condition for the participation of women in the political and democratic life of the communities. There is a host of sociocultural, legal and political constraints to the participation of women as voters and candidates in local council elections, which have to do with the general and specific social organization of human societies.

Political Barriers

The position of female chiefs in the Indian political scenario is bleak. The inherent contradiction that is present in the basic structures of Indian society is an important impediment to the participation of women in Indian society and, as it happened in the case of Ms. Mayawati, also in Indian politics. The perpetuation of these barriers can be seen as a rejection of the right of women to participate in democracy itself. In Indian panchayats, the responsibility of dealing with crime and maintaining law and order falls on the police. Modern society is not without its problems and challenges, and in the long run, women leaders will be viewed less as women and more as strong, vigilant, and protective leaders. In order to survive,

society needs to overcome its belief that these leaders still subscribe to the traditional definition of gender roles.

Initiatives and Policies to Enhance Women's Participation

Notwithstanding the relevance of the provisions to increase women's participation, its success requires that it is portrayed as more than just a token gesture in politics of hypocrisy. The experiences of bringing women into local power structures in the non-political spheres are, however, far from positive. Women have begun to take on many governmental and party functions, but are continued to be subordinate to male peers. Women who hold power at a local level are often anonymous and can easily become targets of harassment, which is increased because they are women. Female local politicians also have to comply with many traditional expectations about the way women should act; widows are exempt from this kind of constraint as are several devoted wives, who are free to assist their husbands even if they are not married themselves. Family relations in general have changed over the past years so much that such practices are consistent with global trends. In other words, local women in India might be delegated the role of modern political servants while it is excluded to them in their families. Such role conflicts are potentially stronger at the local level than at higher levels and often result in female resignation. So, political inclusion and empowerment in the party or electoral process does not necessarily lead to genuine influence over policies. However, the question arises whether quotas for women will mitigate specific cultural and socio-cultural oppression experienced by women. At the same time, electoral quotas ensure political representation and thus the voice of women in political governance. These reservations influence representation only of women who are employed in political institutions. Women in rural parliaments are expected to bring an oversight function as representatives of rural civil society, but it is important to investigate the selection of an alternate representative for each reserved electoral seat.

Integration of Women in Political Parties: The rallying women in grassroots politics proposes various forms of special arrangements by political parties to ensure wider representation of women. This includes reserving of seats for women both in the general councils of the party and in the executive committees at various tiers.

The success of the 73rd amendment in enhancing participation of women in grassroots democracy depends on the initiatives to enhance their participation being taken by these bodies. At the national level, the Government of India has announced a number of programmes that seek to enhance the involvement of women in rural institutions, by which greater participation of women in national decision-making bodies can be sought. The programmes introduced by the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Women and Child Development, which provide support to State Governments for training and capacity building of women and other resource-poor people, are schemes that direct investment towards enhancing involvement.

Reservation Policies

The Constitution of India is in the political domain and thereby stands as a basic determinant in setting the necessary

rules and regulations for the conduct of electoral politics. The inclusion of articles in Part IX of the Constitution, which provides for a three-tier Panchayati Raj system, and the Eleventh Schedule which defines various functions to be performed by the Panchayat, became effective from 24th April 1993. This amendment was seen as a realization of the long-standing demand of women's groups for the incorporation of reservations for women. The institutionalization of the notion of 'gender' as a category of analysis in relation to the state has been woefully inadequate in the field. It is important for the discipline of political science to undertake a thorough and systematic examination of the impact of the reservations for women in the Panchayats for the following reasons.

India opened up possibilities for eliciting the participation of women at the grassroots by a constitutional amendment, thereby earmarking a third of the seats for women in elected bodies of Panchayati Raj institutions. Since the early '90s, the state has tried to correct the systemic gender bias by making legislative interventions. The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 was a constitutional recognition of reservations for women in local bodies by providing for a third of the seats for women. The subsequent implementation of the 73rd Amendment by state governments of India has helped enable national and international political mechanisms for eliciting the participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Capacity Building Programs

Enhancing the skills of women by conducting trainings on varied developmental programs is a significant component in the capacity building process of women for development and for their participation in politics. Small funding from government and political parties does help them to varying degrees, but the results sometimes help the local leaders more than the beneficiaries. Financing provides enabling conditions, rather than the solution, in the process of generating the much-needed resources in the grassroots political arena to advance women's participation. Given this, political actions are essential to coordinate women's demands and claims for resources. But leadership fructifies better with appropriate models of training. Specifically, women's sectors are calling for dedicated training spaces because women encounter unique challenges compared to men. They often juggle the demands of their "double duty" roles within both the family and the workplace.

Impact of Women's Participation in Grassroots Democracy

An overarching conclusion of The Impact of Women in Public Life Project is that to see real change, multiple-sided efforts are necessary to make traditional democratic institutions and public life more accessible for women. The study highlights the paradox of democratic governance in the Indian context. On the one hand, India can boast of having universal suffrage and a number of elected women's representatives that are unmatched in any other developing country. Since its independence, India has had 14 women prime ministers, and honorary bhussar has ten women presidents. The Constitution Seventh Amendment Act of 1989 was a milestone towards political reservation for women in panchayatlerpi to be directly elected to the post of chairpersons and representation. The reservation system was 30 percent of seats have now been

bypassed by the voluntary reservation of 50 percent of the seats but has not resulted in any significant increase in women's electoral success.

The impact of women's participation in grassroots democracy is being monitored through various research, evaluation studies, and impact assessment exercises. The saga of what has happened and the joint journey of empowerment and measures of positive changes in local-level governance have come into visibility. There have been challenges and hurdles, as one would expect in any pioneering exercise. Yet the roadmap is clear, and the success is evident. Women have been visible on the scene as more than fifty percent of the people's representatives. Every local democratic element has looked vibrant, upholding the ever-growing aspirations of the poor and deprived sections.

Social Impact

The strengthening of cooperative links between women through joint income generation projects, setting up savings groups, credit linking, and self-help groups has altered the traditional support system which previously seemed to work adversely to the collective development of the village. In most villages, there has been a perceptible change visible in the community regarding issues related to women. Gradually, a process has been initiated to bring about changes in status, attitudes, and perceptions about women roles relating to personal hygiene, dietary, and lifestyle habits. While all of these are indications of a change in the status of women, this enhanced vision of the role of the females in the village has had a very positive impact on the psychological and physical health of women. It has reduced stress, fatigue, and promoted self-esteem. Additionally, by challenging male entitlement within the family and providing new, more equitable and caring models of engaged citizenship for families, the Seva Mandals and women from the neighborhood were instrumental in handling this problem at the village level. A marked reduction in domestic violence and a decline in alcoholism and illicit gambling, as a result of the closeness and the mutual respect which developed, were very obvious.

The social impact of the participation on the position of women in the family and in the community seems to have been considerable. Their contribution to the income of the household has enhanced their status, sharing in the decision-making process in most cases. A marked increase in their self-esteem and reducing the sense of isolation have been the trends in the majority of the cases. The increase in interaction at different levels with females in the neighborhood has contributed to the breaking down of barriers associated with caste and community living. The sharing of similar problems, joys, and collective celebrations have led to a partnership. The publicity the elected women receive at government and administrative levels has also enhanced the awareness of the village about the contribution of women. The joint ownership of assets has been the most significant change in the economic sphere.

Political Impact

The panchayat elections have produced major political effects across the country. Like other elections, they mobilized some people and increased cross-caste and cross-communal

solidarities, occasionally across states. They produced shifts of political alliances. In some cases, they also produced major disturbances and violence. Large numbers of people attempted to get elected, even though almost certainly in some areas throughout the country a substantial number were forced by others, including, of course, husbands, family heads, and male politicians, to stand. On the whole, the fact of so many people of both sexes standing created difficulties of expectation and anxiety as well as excitement. Specifically, in villages where all women's economic and many other functions had been done by junior women, their exposure to the elections widened their horizons, so that, statistically, significantly fewer women knew their age. More important than this, of course, is the fact that a minority of people, including most of those who attempted to become candidates, knew little of the internal logic of the political system and its geography of subordination.

II. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The GAD movement tended to be more effective, measured in terms of women elected to governmental office, than the pre-GAD movement, although the positive impact might be more visible at the lower rungs of the three-tier system of panchayats. Not all states of the Indian Republic have shown the same degree of responsiveness to the Act. The extent of the opposition of the rural elite to reserving positions for women had a significant impact only in the states of Orissa, Karnataka, and Rajasthan. The other states in turn displayed either passive opposition or, more frequently, negotiation. The most positive impact on the movement in terms of the participation of women was seen in the response of the states to the movement that preceded the Act. These two variables thus turned out to be significant. The variables of the demand for the repeal of the law on the part of the rural elite and the response of the state to the earlier movement appeared as the most significant singular variables in the SCFs, with the impacts tending to be negative in the case of variables one and six, and positive in the case of variables two and three. Finally, a simple correlation was computed.

It is extremely curious that there are few accounts of the participation of women in grassroots democracy in India from the parent disciplines of political science and public administration. Given that the 74th Amendment of the Constitution has made provision for the reservation of at least one-third of the positions in local government for women, it can reasonably be expected that the re-introduction of women in the area is taken rather seriously. It is perhaps not so curious that there exists only a small amount of research in this area—enough to be suggestive and inadequate to be extrapolated. That said, the research is nonetheless suggestive and meaningful, indicating that the replacement of the umbrella movement by the Indian women's movement in 1975 by the GAD movement in 1985 had a positive impact on the participation of women in these institutions.

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