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Women and Panchayats in India: Creating a New Space for Leadership in Asia.

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"It is not merely that more justice must be received by women, but also that social justice can be achieved only through the active agency of women. The suppression of women from participation in social, political, and economic life hurts the people as a whole, not just women. The emancipation of women is an integral part of social progress, not just a women's issue."

Dreze and Sen (1999:178)²

The Millennium Development Goals (2000) also highlighted the above concern. The goals include the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty, universal primary education, gender equality, empowerment for women, reduction of child mortality, improvement of maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases as well as ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development. All these goals assume additional significance once it is realized that women suffer a lot of deprivation due to lack of achieving the above goals. As for example it is well known that majority of the poor in the world are found among women, the percentage of illiteracy among the women is higher than those of men, and access to primary health care is always denied to large percentage of women so on so forth. Realizing the above picture various governments have been taking various measures to improve the conditions of women. Indian government is no exception. Along with various measures such as providing micro-credit to women, the government has also amended the Constitution in 1993 in which the local government institutions have been given a new lease of life to plan and execute the local development planning in which not less than one-third seats have been reserved for women. The local government institutions are known as panchayats or village councils in India. According to 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1993, the panchayats have been given tenure of five years, an election and a finance commission, 29 subjects to plan and execute and a wide based participation at the grassroots level. Interestingly the 29 subjects given to panchayats include eradicating the poverty to providing primary education as well as the

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² Dreze, Jean and A. Sen (1999) India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity, {1995}, New Delhi, OUP.

other aspects of wellbeing of the villagers. In other words the panchayats have been involved in the task of fulfilling the MDG in a participatory manner. *It is our contention that being in the panchayats the women themselves have been involved in the task of the local development (in turn fulfilling the MDG) in a big way and have assumed the role of leadership in Asia in spite of being the beginners in the political process.*

In order to test the above hypothesis the following steps will be followed. First some of the government initiatives including that of panchayats and the structure of those institutions will be discussed followed by a discussion on the impact of the panchayats on the lives of villagers. After that the impact of panchayats on women such as social mobilization etc. as well as the quality of participation will be taken up. After that some of the factors affecting the quality of participation will be high lighted. A summing up will follow in the last section.

Government Initiatives and Panchayati Raj Institutions

After independence, the government of India did take various initiatives to improve the status of women in India. The government initiatives can be characterized as ‘Women in Development’ ‘Gender and Development’ and finally ‘Rights – based development’.

The details of these approaches have been discussed by many. (*Human Development in South Asia 2001*; Mohanty and Mahajan 2004).

Suffice to say here that the government of India passed a piece of progressive legislation in 1993 to enable the presence of a ‘critical mass’ of women in the decentralized decision making process. The above enabling measure can be characterized as the facilitator of ‘rights based approach’ to women’s empowerment. These would address some of the deprivations which face Asian women in general and Indian women in particular. In the next section some of the features of the panchayats will be discussed.

The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment Act) was originally initiated by the late Rajiv Gandhi as Sixty-fourth Amendment but got defeated in the Parliament. It was passed after the death of Rajiv Gandhi during the tenure of Narasimha Rao. Since the Act was a landmark in the history of the local government or Panchayati Raj system, it is worth while to narrate some of the salient features of the above Act. First of all, the new Panchayati Raj system has a three tier system namely, village panchayat, block panchayat and district panchayat. The size of population in an area determines the size of each tier. In each tenure about 600 District panchayats, 5912 Block panchayats and

2, 31630 *gram* panchayats are formed in which around three million elected representatives interact (Mathew 2000).

The most important feature of the Act from the women's perspective is the reservation of at least one-third of total seats for women both at the functionaries and membership level. Another landmark of the above Act is the importance given to the *gram sabha* or the village assembly, having adults of the panchayat as its members. The panchayats act as an executive body and the *gram sabha* acts as the watchdog to which the panchayats would be accountable. Panchayats have a separate Finance Commission as well as an Election Commission (Mathew 2000). Twenty-nine subjects ranging from agriculture access to primary education, and poverty alleviation have been devolved to the panchayats. Need less to say that the panchayats have been given the tasks of planning, implementing and monitoring those subjects which form the core of millennium development goals. Almost all the schemes meant for poverty alleviation directly such as *Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana* (SGSY), *Gram Samridhi Yojana* etc. are routed through the panchayats, though money is subject to sanction from the Central Government. At present the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) providing 100 days of work to whoever seeks for it has been routed through the panchayats. The main chunk of the panchayat income is utilized on infrastructure (construction of small irrigation structures, source of drinking water, roads, repairing of community buildings etc.), and implementing the welfare schemes (old age and widow pension and maternity benefits). In principle, the panchayat has complete flexibility in allocating these funds (Chattopadhyay and Dublo 2004).

For the first time, incidentally, the Eleventh Finance Commission (meant for allocating finances to local bodies in different states) has devoted one complete chapter for panchayat's finance. It has recommended an amount of 80,000 million rupees (\$1=45 Rupees) for all the panchayats in the country. This amount is meant for five years! Even though it is highly inadequate and fulfills only a fraction of the requirements, it is worthwhile to note that the Commission gives due emphasis on the index of decentralization. Incidentally the amount of money given to each village panchayat varies from state to state. For example, in West Bengal a *gram panchayat* gets on an average 1.5 million rupees per year but in a state like Rajasthan it used to get only 60 thousand rupees in the first tenure. In Kerala on the other hand, panchayats were given 35 to 40 per cent of the plan funds to work with. In terms of the financial resources it amounted to 1025,000 rupees excluding the grant from the central government in one year only. (Isaac 2000). Interestingly, the new government at the

centre has been reiterating the importance of *panchayati raj* institutions in furthering the rural development (*The Economic Times* 2004). The government has set up a separate panchayati raj ministry and so far eight consultative meetings have been organized by the ministry to discuss various aspects of the system with a view to make it more efficient than before.

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that the real fiscal decentralization in terms of deciding to spend money their own way and augmenting local revenue is yet to be with the *panchayati raj* institutions. (Sethi 2004). (The study conducted by the World Bank (2004) showed that none but only two states in Kerala and to some extent, Karnataka have devolved the financial and administrative power to the panchayats.).

Impact of the Panchayats on the Lives of Villagers

The first and foremost impact of the above Act has been the widening and strengthening the base of participatory democracy. Because of reservation a large number of women has been elected particularly from the lower socio-economic strata (Buch 2000; Survey-2004). Further, at least 90 per cent of the ward members are from low socio-economic background and those of higher categories are from the high caste/class. Almost all the states have conducted elections at the panchayat level. Some states have conducted the elections for the second time. About three million elected representatives have been elected to these political institutions of which about one million are women as mentioned above.

The most significant impact of the legislation has been to bring five million women to active politics within a span of ten years (Buch 2000). We are interested to know the impact of the large number of women emerging at the level of grass roots politics which will be taken up at a later stage. (The arithmetic of the five million women can be explained in the following manner. First of all in each tenure one million women get elected. Secondly for each seat two to three women on an average contest the election. Thus all together five to six million women participate in the political process.)

Yet another impact of the PRIs is the reduction of poverty ratio from 38 per cent to 26 per cent and a slight increase in the rate of urbanization by 2 per cent between 1991 and 2001. (*Economic Survey* 2002) At least a major part of these results can be explained by the implementation of schemes meant for poverty alleviation through panchayats. It is interesting to note that within a span of two years, between 1999 and 2001, about 35793 million rupees were allocated, out of which 72 per cent was utilized. About 2.4 million

Swarozgaries (self-earners) were assisted of which 44 per cent are women. (Government of India, *Annual Report, 2001-02*). (By the way, the government has a policy to allocate at least 30 per cent of the total amount of money available for any scheme for women). This forms a significant portion of a total sum of 97650 million rupees, which were allocated for rural development, rural employment and poverty alleviation programmes for the financial year 2001-02. (*Economic Survey 2001-2002*). Unfortunately, the total allocation of financial resources to rural development is not restricted through panchayats, but the schemes routed through these institutions are better targeted, as is pointed out a little later.

There are debates regarding the role of decentralization in reducing the incidence of poverty in a particular area. Johnson (2002), who has reviewed the existing literature on the subject, is of the opinion that there is a weak relationship between decentralization and the reduction in poverty. Johnson also cites other studies to show that the panchayats provide space for marginalized sections of the people to articulate their needs. Further, it is also observed that the panchayats decisions are not restricted to class (ibid.).

On the other hand, other experts have shown that the panchayats were responsible for reducing the poverty ratio in India by targeting the delivery of services in a more focused manner. (Bardhan and Mukherjee 2004). The authors have done extensive empirical research in West Bengal. They have pointed out that panchayats in West Bengal have targeted land reforms, delivery of agricultural mini-kits, initiating employment programmes and access to credit - all of which have led to poverty alleviation. They have analyzed the performance of 89 villages and the time period extends to twenty years. Of course, they agree with the above author in so far as inequality of assets and lack decentralization is concerned but they also conclude that if the political party in power feels vulnerable at the state level then the anti-poverty programmes are targeted in an efficient manner. (The literature on decentralization and development outcomes is more or less silent regarding the gender. However, if one clubs women with the poor the same analysis as above will be applicable. Mukhopadhyay2005)

The Impact of Panchayats on Women

The impact of panchayats on women's lives have been tremendous and varied. In fact the entry to the panchayats has been described by some as a beginning of a 'silent revolution'. These institutions have influenced social, political and economic lives of the village women in more than one ways as will be seen below.

The sources of data are: (a) A longitudinal study of 235 elected women representatives in panchayats in 22 panchayats spread over three districts of Orissa-an eastern state of India keeping different locales in mind, with an objective of monitoring and capacity building for leadership roles.(The study was conducted for four years. Close monitoring of their performance in the panchayats, and capacity building and other related activities were taken up at the village level.) The project spanned five years. It was taken up by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi. (b)A survey was conducted among more than 800 elected women representatives (EWRs) from fourteen states who had come to attend an annual programme to celebrate the Women's Political Empowerment Day to New Delhi. A written questionnaire was fielded among the EWRs to know their views about various issues. In addition, various micro-studies which have been conducted in different parts of India have also been cited.

Institutional Impact: Engendering Development:

According to various micro-studies including our own observations from the field, about 80-90 per cent women attend the panchayat meetings regularly. (Buch 2000, EKATRA 2003). Given their sheer numbers, one might conclude that democracy has become more participatory than before, at least at the grassroots level. This argument is strengthened by the fact that the socio-economic background of these women showed that majority of them come from the lower income group, particularly in the case of membership at the village panchayat level. As for example about eighty five per cent of the EWRs who came to the above programme were from village panchayats and most of them belonged either to Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribes or Other Backward Castes-all three castes are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. So far they have been excluded from the decision making process. Asked about whether they attended gram sabha or village assembly or not - which is mandatory for the panchayats members - about seventy per cent of them said that they participated the meeting regularly. In so far as the effective participation of these women is concerned, it is noticed that if they get outside support in terms of NGO intervention, women's groups, or any other social or political movement, the women become relatively more vocal. Their knowledge about the functioning of the panchayats increases. (Kumud Sharma nd.)Again the EWRs were asked as to what kind of activities they have taken up during their tenure, they pointed out that ensuring safe drinking water, air distribution of ration, looking after the village sanitation, etc. have been their main priority. Related to the above issue (the impact on the institutional standards) is the question of the 'proxy women'. Let us define the term called proxy women. It is alleged that since many of the women are first timers and are illiterate they depend on their men folk for conducting the panchayat

activities. In other words, the women follow their men folk without understanding the implications. Hence they are termed as 'proxy' women.

There are several issues involved here. First of all, the husbands or other male relatives shield them from the panchayat Secretary, and block development officers if they try to harass the women. In fact, some of the state governments (Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan) have passed a rule that the women elected representatives should be accompanied by their male relatives to the panchayats (Rai et.al. 2001). This is because in some cases, the secretaries of the panchayats, and male colleagues tried to implicate inexperienced women by asking them to sign blank cheques. Some of the women chiefs went to jails because of those acts. In many cases, no-confidence motions were passed in the panchayats, against the women chiefs on false charges.

Again, even if they depend on their husbands, the power relation between husband and wife has already changed because of reservations, particularly because the husband gets a chance to come to the public sphere because of the wife, and in the process the character of patriarchy gets altered. As a result, in many low -income families the husband - wife relationship has not soured. On the other hand, the husband supports the wife and also helps her in her domestic work. Even the other members of the family including the mother-in-law and sister-in-law help her to complete domestic chores. The community leaders of the same caste also support the women candidates.

Besides, those who argue that the women coming to panchayats are all 'proxy' women forget to analyze their socio-economic background. Many of the women, even in places like Northern India, are recruited from the white-collar background. Since they are educated and know about the working of the official system they will not remain silent in the panchayat meetings. The same critics assume that all the men who work on behalf of women are corrupt and want to grab power. But in reality it may not be true.

Finally, the 'proxy' women syndrome is seen only in the first one or two years of the tenure. Gradually, the women become independent, as studies conducted in Karnataka show (Mathew 2002). In the process, they come to know about many modern institutions like courts, block development office, agriculture and other offices, the existence of various officials and some times about the Prime Minister, Chief Ministers and other ministers.

Women not only take up issues relating to basic needs, such as, drinking water, availability of doctors and teachers in the villages, which are dear to them, but also general developmental activities, for example, augmenting the income of the panchayats and generating irrigation facilities for the paddy field. The micro-study conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences referred to earlier also shows that not only are the schemes better targeted but also the knowledge

about different largesse such as widow and old age pensions, availability of free rice spreads fast among the women because of the presence of women in the panchayats. The women of the neighborhood act as the 'watchdog' in compelling the elected women to deliver at least some goods. Women of the villages can easily approach the women elected members and can get subsidized rice at any time.

Micro- studies conducted in various parts of the country (Datta 1998, Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004, Buch 2000) reveal that given a chance the elected women representatives try to engender the developmental activities. For example, in her study on twelve all women panchayats, Datta pointed out that elected women representatives gave more priority to such programmes, which were 'need based' and 'sustainable'.

Thus, we see that, contrary to the popular criticism, the standard of the political institutions at the grassroots level has not been lowered as a result of women's reservations and on the other hand the development process has been engendered to some extent.

Social Mobilization

Involvement of three million women in grass roots politics by itself has created an expansion of public space as well as that of private space for the women. In the public space they have been allowed to attend the panchayat meetings along with other male colleagues, address gram sabha(village assembly),go to government offices to meet the Block Development Officer and other Line Department personnel. In addition, women get opportunity to network and facilitate conditions for creating the 'social capital'. These conditions get reinforced with another set of forces which also involve a large number of women through micro-credit programme. In the private sphere, their working relations change. The area of cooperation increases at the family level also.

At this point a reference can be made to the implementation of an important scheme, namely, SGSY through the panchayats and its impact on the poor in general, and poor women, in particular. The main features of the scheme are that it lays stress on a few select activities in each developmental block and attends to all aspects of these activities ranging from availability of raw materials, upgrading skills to marketing. The main objective of the scheme is to augment a sustainable income of the *Swarozgaries* (Self-earners) through the above investment. A major component of the scheme was in operation since the eighties in the form of Development of Women and Child in Rural Areas (DWCRA) and had created some successful groups in one of the states of India- Andhra Pradesh. The scheme was initiated by the government being

encouraged by the women's conference in Nairobi. (Of course, the government is not sole agency in initiating the micro finance programme. It is not always routed through the panchayats. World Bank, NABARD and other funding agencies have taken up the micro- credit programme in a big way). The revised scheme has borrowed a few innovative concepts from the Grameen bank, Bangladesh such as flexibility in payment. In addition, the above scheme emphasizes social mobilization of poor in the rural areas. Several women entrepreneurs have emerged as a result (Government of India, (nd) SGSY: Guidelines). In order gauge the magnitude of women's involvement in micro-credit programme, it would be sufficient to mention here that in Dhaka Declaration of the South Asian Coalition for the Micro- credit Summit 1996 articulated the collective consensus among 21 networks which deliver financial services to 4.5 million poor people in Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2005)

Studies conducted on the impact of Self Help groups (SHGs) show that women's group formation, new knowledge and moreover, group mobilization is capable of creating an alternative to women's traditional status in the family. Group mobilization also enables women to speak out in the village meetings (Vijayanthi 2002). The micro-credit scheme has also caught the imagination of various funding agencies as has been referred to earlier. Several studies have been conducted to assess the impact of micro-credit on the status of women. (Kabeer 2005). It is agreed that even though it doesn't lead to 'virtuous spiral of economic, social, and political empowerment of women' (Mayoux, 1999), it does lead to empowering some women. In economic terms it also reduce the vulnerability at the time of natural calamity so to that extent the power relation at the family level changes. It is also noticed that if men are involved in the programme women's 'practical needs' are met. (Leach and Sitaram 2002). In addition, the programme helps in creating the 'social capital' in a community since it encourages collective action. The social mobilization created by the SGSY/SHGs gets reinforced by another factor namely, women's participation in the political process through campaigning, addressing the meetings and going to cast their votes.

Sen (1983) has mentioned that the family is an arena of cooperation and conflict. It is observed that the reservation of seats in the local governments has increased the areas of cooperation at the family level (Monitoring and Evaluating Study referred to above). The in-laws help the EWRs in finishing the household chores and look after the small children to allow them for attending the panchayat meetings. Some times the husbands take them on bicycles if the panchayat office is far away from their own villages. The results of the Census of India, 2001 shows that the female life expectancy at birth has exceeded that of males marginally. It indicates that women's self perception has changed and they look after their health and nutritional status.

Similarly the female literacy rate has jumped from being 39 per cent to 53 per cent within a decade. A part of this quantum jump could be explained in terms of the women's excitement to become literate after getting elected. Because it was noticed that women came to National Literacy Mission camp in large number at night to get themselves educated (Saldanha 1995). Same kind of enthusiasm was noticed when they were asked about getting educated and sending their daughters to schools.

Constraints

The constraints are many. The most important constraint of women's empowerment through panchayat is that they are not a homogenous category. They represent different interest groups depending on their class and caste, which get perpetuated through patriarchy. However, one redeeming factor in uniting the women is the access to the basic services such as drinking water, health care facility and education - the practical needs. Secondly predominant trend of Indian culture is still very patriarchal and the women are looked down upon. The EWRs are not taken seriously by their male colleagues and the bureaucrats and they get very scant information about the functioning of the panchayats. In some places EWRs get overburdened because of household chores as well as that of panchayats. Even though theoretically one may dismiss the notion of 'proxy women' in the real world husbands do take advantage of the ignorant women and work on behalf of them without giving any space.

Again, in many places the women are not immune to systemic corruption though as beginners they are relatively more cautious. Joining politics is still considered 'dirty' and is frowned upon. The community leaders of the village try to choose candidates who are non-performers or would toe their line. The women themselves do not come forward. It is always the family members, or party leaders who push them to contest. The selection of seats for reservations-which are done on a lottery basis and only for one term-does not provide much scope for nurturing a constituency. Even if the women perform well during the first term, the men do not allow them to contest from the same seat again. The panchayat institutions are used as an implementing agency. So the bureaucrats feel that they are the bosses and the first timer leaders are there to obey them.

Violence against women has also increased. A woman chief of the panchayat was killed in one of the states because she defied her husband and called the meeting of the village assembly to discuss the agenda of the budget. In some cases, women representatives do not know that they have been elected from certain constituencies (Rai et. al. 2001). The inter-caste violence has become more acute and so much so that a woman member of a *nagar palika* (township government) in an urban part of Tamil Nadu was murdered because she wanted to bring piped

water to her ward. She belonged to a low caste community. In yet another case another woman was forced by the villagers to quit her menial job because it did not suit her status as elected representative.

In a nut shell, men support women in panchayats so long as women do not challenge them to fulfill the 'practical needs'. But men feel threatened as and when the women try to fulfill the 'strategic needs'.

Apart from the specific constraints, the PRIs system as a whole face several structural constraints such as limited power and resources, the absence of appointed cadre and hence, dependence on the state level functionaries and so on. Again the panchayats are given 29 subjects which are included in different departments. But the policy matters are not conveyed to the elected representatives at all. So the elected representatives can not take decisions on their own regarding any subject, such as, agriculture, irrigation, family welfare etc. except only in implementing schemes or acting as the spokespersons of the state governments.

Besides, there are a number of parallel structures such as Janmabhumi program in Andhra Pradesh, Vana panchayat (Joint Forest Management), Uttar Pradesh and Water Harvesting Management, etc. which try to ignore the involvement of the PRIs. All these systemic constraints also affect the functioning of the women in panchayats.

On the whole, however, it can be argued that reservation of seats in the local council has provided a critical mass of women with an opportunity to empower themselves by being partners in decision making process.

Conclusions

The MDG has set various goals such as eradication of poverty which includes access to primary education, sanitation, drinking water, reduction of maternal mortality, empowerment of women etc. to be achieved within a span of a decade. In India a bold experiment has been taken up in the form of giving more power to the village councils or panchayats which in turn will be responsible to local level of development by involving the entire village. Not less than one- third seats have been reserved for the women in all three tiers of panchayats. In the process three million elected representatives have been elected per term of five years out of which one million are women. In other words women and men at the grassroots level are the planners for realizing the MDG on their own terms. Debates on decentralization and poverty are not conclusive but it is agreed that the delivery of basic services become more targeted if they are routed through the panchayats.

The impact of panchayats in the lives of women has been quite significant because it affected women's lives socially, politically and economically since they got enough space to negotiate at the private and public space. They could cross the four boundaries of the hearth which has been assigned to them traditionally. The presence of a large number of women in panchayats as well in the micro-credit programme has led to social mobilization and created conditions for social capital. The patriarchal values which permeate all the institutions of India also affect the panchayatiraj institutions. Women who get elected to the panchayats become subjected to the caste, class and patriarchal values. Domestic violence has increased against women since some of them try challenge the male bastion by entering into politics. The panchayats also suffer from systemic constraints such as lack of financial and administrative power. Corruptions is also rampant among the elected representatives.

Nonetheless a space has been created for Asian women to emerge as a formidable force to fight for social justice and human rights.

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