

Women Empowerment at Local Level: A Prerequisite for Deepening of Democracy

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to understand the necessity to empower women at the grassroots level in order to make the democracy take deeper roots in India. For this to happen, women participation in the local bodies i.e., the panchayati raj institutions is necessary. Panchayati raj institutions are the lowest in the pyramid of power structures and grounded with direct access to the people at village and ward level. Focusing on the development of the panchayati raj institutions with a special focus on the participation of women in the political process can be a bottom-up approach that will help the women to come out of the clutches of patriarchy and make the democratic process participatory in nature. To make this bottom-up, participatory approach possible, India has made many legislations in an incremental manner in favour of panchayati raj institutions, including reserving seats to women. This paper tracks down the changes that have been made to make the panchayati raj institutions democratic – with the participation of women. The paper focusses on amendments made to the constitution of India and other legislations made by various state governments in order to strengthen the local bodies. This article also discusses the expanding role of women in the local bodies corresponding to the importance that the local bodies have gained over a period of time.

Key Words: 73rd amendment, deepening of democracy, gram sabha, panchayati raj, reservations, women empowerment.

Introduction

Indian Constitution provided equality of sexes but patriarchy has been negating it. An effort was made through the Balwantrai Mehta and Ashok Mehta Committees to restore it but in vain. Finally, the Constitution (seventy-third) Amendment Act restored equality and made wide-ranging recommendations to restore gender parity. But even this act has deficiencies that need to be corrected to take full advantage of its provisions and provide women with 33 per cent reservation in Panchayats. This is the best way to provide full justice to half of humanity i.e. the women of India. The Constitution of India breathes the spirit of equality and prohibits discrimination among sexes. Reads article 14 “Equality before law - The state shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of laws within the territory of India”¹. This is further elucidated in Article 15 which reads “Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, sex or place of birth”². Thus parity between sexes is ensured. But this is only a constitutional dictum. Something more was needed to usher in a completely equalitarian order. This was through reservations for women such as the one given to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward castes. The first step in this direction could be through Panchayats, about which the Constitution says in Article 40 “Organisation of village Panchayats - The state shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government”³. In addition, Part-IX of the Constitution was inserted by the

¹ Ministry of Law and Justice, The Constitution of India (2021), Government of India. New Delhi.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Constitution (seventy-third amendment) Act, 1992 which consists of 16 articles viz article 243 and 243-A to Article 243 (o)⁴. Thus after the 73rd amendment, fairly comprehensive provisions were added to make the experiment of Panchayats genuine and ongoing.

Law and Leviathan:

Centuries ago, Aristotle declared that “Man is by nature a political animal”⁵, and “in democracies which are subject to law, the best citizen holds the first place and there are no demagogues but where the laws are not supreme, there demagogues spring up”⁶. For long, the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa showed great eagerness to preserve and consolidate institutions that were bequeathed to them by their colonial masters because it suited their appetite for absolute power. In this, patriarchy also played its role and monopolised all powers like Leviathan to the exclusion of the other half of humanity – the women. The patriarchal custodians of democracy did not want to share their power with anyone be it the grassroots political institutions or women and hence were against the whittling down of power given to them. As Vibhuti Singh Shekhawat has pointed out, “the old maxim that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely through a multiplier effect seems to be holding no brief for such of the repositories of political power who revel in increasing their authority at the cost of local satraps who are in all probability better suited than the central and state level political bosses to minister to the requirements of locality in urban centres and rural clusters, for it is they who can provide vitally needed service at the grassroots levels”⁷. Apropos of this is said by Carr “strong institutions of local government conventionally have been regarded as essential ingredients of a dynamic democratic society and stabilising force that helps to prevent development of a monolithic political structure”⁸.

Representation of all citizens is crucial for the effective running of democratic institutions. The relative lack of women in elected legislatures has caught the eyes of politicians and political scientists. In the world of today, their representation varies from 5 to 10 per cent except in the Nordic countries where this percentage has gone up to 40 per cent and above⁹. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) owe their origin to the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1993 which gave wide-ranging rights to women. Earlier, the position was that if no woman gets elected, two women may be put into PRIs through co-option, though even this was not uniformly enforced and the states of Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir did not follow the co-option scheme. Panchayati Raj is not a new idea but a hoary concept dating back to the days of Rigveda, Kautilya’s Arthashastra and Jain and Buddhist scriptures. But in the present constitution, PRIs are mentioned only in Directive Principles of State Policy. The Balwant Rai Mehta and Ashoka Mehta committees tried to reinvigorate the PRIs but comprehensive recommendations came through the 73rd amendment to the constitution which paved the way for ushering into grassroots democracy in India. The states of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh raised the nomination level to 20 to 25 per cent. Finally, it was raised to 33 and 50 per cent but illiteracy among women created the proxy women syndrome by which the husbands of women acquired domination of PRIs. Even so, gradually women learnt to use PRIs for their upward social mobility. The self-help groups also helped women acquire knowledge of PRIs and enabled them to become representatives of women.

Panchayati Raj was inaugurated on April 2, 1993, as a sequel to the coming into force of the Constitution (Seventy-third) Amendment Act, 1992 which came into force in 1993. The earlier position was that if no women get elected in a direct election, two of them may be co-opted. This was the prevalent position in the 1960s and 1970s but the disquieting aspect was that even this practice was not uniformly enforced and the states of Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir did not follow this scheme of co-option/nomination. It may be added that even this niggardly scheme of nomination of two women was open to abuse and influential caste leaders used this co-option provision to put their wives in PRIs. It took nearly 43 years to realise that the disadvantaged and the discriminated against group of one-half of humanity, hitherto neglected, needed proper and just representation.

The difficulty with the parochial-minded and discrimination-prone patriarchy was that Indian women were treated like second-class citizens and pushed to a secondary position on the social scale. Women in India

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in Seymore Martin Lipsit, *Political Man* (New Delhi), 1997, P.7.

⁶ Ibid., P.8.

⁷ Vibhuti Singh Shekhawat, *Democracy at the Door Steps: The Crisis of Reforms*, in C.P. Barthwal (ed.) *Public Administration*, Department of Public Administration, Lucknow University, Kamala Printers, Lucknow (1996), P.37.

⁸ Robert, Carr, Marver H. Bernstein and Walter F. Murphy, *American Democracy* (New Delhi), Fifth edition, P.546.

⁹ Hona Moore, *The Women’s Question: Representation in Rural India* (2017), University of Minnesota, Morris.

suffered from several societal lags such as social taboos, child marriage, female feticide, prevention of widow re-marriage and overall gender disparity. All this happened because of the education deficit of women, even though the Constitution provided for equality of sexes. Owing to illiteracy and ignorance of constitutional provisions, Indian women continued to grope in the dark and failed to take advantage of constitutional provisions. They were fated to live in a pungent past, a perilous present and a devastatingly derelict future.

Origin and Ancestry of Concept:

Panchayati Raj is not an altogether new concept and dates back to the age of Vedas. It finds mention in Rigveda, Kautilya's Arthshastra, inscriptions on Ashoka pillars and in the scriptures of Jains and Buddhists. There was fair participation of women in Janapadas (regional bodies), Paura Sabha (City Council) and Gram Sabha (village assembly). The British introduced local-self-government but did not take to the logical end to usher in grassroots democracy.

It was only after independence that attention was focussed on women's plight and steps were taken to ameliorate their condition. But, in the beginning, it was nothing more than lip service as PRIs were put in the non-justiciable Directive Principles of State Policy. Post-independence, attention was focused on PRIs and efforts made to rejuvenate them. In 1957, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee was formed to examine the structure of Panchayats to suggest steps to improve and upgrade them. It suggested the democratisation of Panchayats at village, block and district level. It recommended a three-tier system to execute people-friendly programmes through popular participation.

The next was the Ashoka Mehta Committee (1977) for the better administration of the Panchayati Raj system. The Committee's suggestions inspired the Governments of Kerala, Karnataka and West Bengal to restructure their Panchayats. But work of far-reaching importance was undertaken by the Rajiv Gandhi government that enacted the Constitution (seventy-third) Amendment, 1992, which came into force in 1993. It recommended a complete overhaul of the Panchayati Raj system at village, block and district levels, with provision for a separate election and finance commission, to ensure periodic elections and financial devolution. Rajiv Gandhi made a sincere effort to arm Panchayats with the necessary powers to usher in grassroots democracy at the lowest level of governance.

As stated earlier, the Balwanti Rai Mehta Committee made many useful recommendations to ensure the representation of rural women. These recommendations were also incorporated in the Maharashtra Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti, Act of 1961 which provided for the nomination of one or two women in each of these bodies. In the year 1978, only six women were elected in Maharashtra Panchayats and this necessitated the nomination of women to ensure them just representation. It was the state of Andhra Pradesh, which showed the way of women representation. The extent of nomination of women in Panchayati Raj bodies was raised to 20 to 25 per cent. Taking a cue from it, the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) suggested 30 per cent reservation for women in these bodies. The same recommendation was made in the unsuccessful 64th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1989. But the most comprehensive recommendation was made in the Constitution (Seventy-third) Amendment Act, 1992.

In the meanwhile, several states raised the reservation limit for women. The state of Andhra Pradesh introduced 22-25 per cent reservation for Gram Panchayats and in Karnataka, it was 25 per cent in Mandal Praja Parishads. Few people know that the origin of Panchayati Raj took place in a place called Nagore in Rajasthan on October 2, 1959. Since then much water has flown down the rivers of Rajasthan. From Rajasthan Panchayat Raj 1959 to 1994 and 1999, 2000, 2008 and 2015, the reservation limit has shot up to 33 per cent and then further raised to 50 per cent in 2008 in local bodies.

Argument and Innovation:

In India, the realisation dawned on the Indian lawmakers and parliamentarians that representation through reservation is the only way to ensure women a fair share in governance and this could be only through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to begin with. Accordingly, several committees were set up to improve the structure of PRIs such as the Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1952), Ashok Mehta Committee (1957), CAARI Commission (1988), the abortive 64th Amendment Bill, and finally the 73rd (Constitutional Amendment) Act, 1992 that provided a 33 per cent reservation to women in PRIs, and also provided for a separate election commission and a finance commission to strengthen the roots of Panchayati Raj system and empowered them to hold elections regularly.

The last one was aimed at providing vital societal changes through reservation for women. Following the 73rd Amendment Act, the 74th Amendment Act was also passed to strengthen municipalities and provide for Nagar Panchayats. One may briefly analyse both these acts. The Constitution (seventy-third) Amendment Act, 1992, envisages democracy at your doorstep and hence aims at re-structuring and re-orienting the entire

rural setting in India to create a rural democracy in which the Gram Sabha would perform various important functions, entrusted to it by law.

Structural Profile:

These Panchayats are to be elected directly by the voters in the Panchayati Raj area¹⁰. The Chairperson too is to be directly elected and she is removable through a vote of no-confidence, passed by the majority of the total number of elected members of the Panchayats and two-thirds of members present and voting. It then recommends to the Gram Sabha, the removal of Chairperson. The Gram Sabha then meets within a fortnight and if at least 50 per cent of its members who are present pass a resolution by the majority of members present and voting, the Chairperson stands removed. In the event of Gram Sabha not meeting for want of quorum, the resolution passed by Panchayat lapses and it cannot pass it again for one year at least. Thus there is some relief for the Chairperson. The Act also provides for reservation of seats to members belonging to scheduled castes and tribes but here too, the rider is that at least one-third of seats will be reserved for women¹¹. The state legislature may permit reservations for other backward classes too. The tenure of every Panchayat shall be five years unless it is dissolved earlier. After dissolution, a new Panchayat shall be elected within six months. But this Panchayat's tenure will not be five years. It shall act only till the remaining period of the dissolved Panchayat.

Functional Profile:

The Panchayat is authorised to levy and collect taxes and within a year of commencement of this Amendment Act, the Governor of the state shall constitute a Finance Commission to review and allocate finances to the Panchayat. The Commission's tenure would be five years. Twenty-nine subjects are placed under the jurisdiction of the Panchayat. They are enumerated in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution and are enumerated below:

- 1) Agriculture, including agricultural extension, 2) Land improvement and soil conservation, 3) Minor irrigation, water management and watershed development, 4) Animal husbandry, dairying and poultry, 5) Fisheries, 6) Social forestry and farm forestry, 7) Minor forest produce, 8) Small scale industries, including food processing industries, 9) Khadi, village and cottage industry, 10) Rural housing, 11) Drinking water, 12) Fuel and fodder, 13) Roads, culverts, bridges, ferries, water ways and other means of communication, 14) Rural electrification, including distribution of electricity, 15) Non-conventional energy sources, 16) Poverty alleviation programme, 17) Education, including primary and secondary school, 18) Technical training and vocational education, 19) Adult and non-formal education, 20) Libraries, 21) Cultural activities, 22) Markets and fairs, 23) Health and sanitation including hospitals, primary health centres and dispensaries, 24) Family welfare, 25) Women and child development, 26) Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded, 27) Welfare of the weaker sections and in particular of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, 28) Public distribution system, 29) Maintenance of community assets.

The Act shall not apply to the tribal states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and hill areas of Manipur where district councils exist and the district of Darjeeling in West Bengal where Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council exists¹². The Constitution (seventy-fourth) Amendment, 1992 provides for the formation of a Nagar Panchayat for a transitional area, a Municipal Council for small urban areas and a Municipal Corporation for large urban areas.

Efforts to Revamp Panchayati Raj System:

Mention has already been made of earlier efforts through Balwantrai Mehta and Ashok Mehta Committees. To these may be added G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985), L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986), Chief Secretaries Conference (1988), Thungon Committee (1988), Chief Ministers Conference (1989) and introduction of Constitution (Sixty-fourth) Amendment Act, 1989, which was passed by the Lok Sabha but fell through in the Rajya Sabha. Finally, there was the 73rd Amendment Act, of 1992, which came into force in 1993.

¹⁰ Constitution of India, article 243 (C)

¹¹ Ibid., 243 (D)

¹² Ibid., 243 (M)

Execution of Act:

The Act came into force in 1993, after being ratified by fifty per cent of state legislatures. After its passage, almost all states enacted their own Panchayat Raj laws¹³. This is a good augury. The participation of rural masses and women in Gram Sabha meetings is creating a new awareness among the rural people, including women. It helps them to identify the local needs and priorities. It also helps in the better and quicker implementation of developmental programmes. However, the frequency of changes in the original Act has left many participants dumbfounded because it is difficult to keep note of all changes. Nor is resource allocation satisfying. There is only a marginal increase in the income of Panchayats. One may look at the perils and pitfalls of the new changes.

Perils and Pitfalls:

Panchayats are new to modern India. They have a hoary ancestry and are mentioned in ancient texts such as Manusmriti, Mahabharat's Shantiparva, Kautilya's Arthashastra and Shukarcharya's Neetisastra. Their origin is traceable to the period of King Prithu when he was colonising the Ganga-Yamuna Doab¹⁴. However far-reaching changes were brought about by the Constitution (seventy-third) Amendment Act, 1992. One can focus on its shortcomings below:

1. A major flaw in the act is that of the twenty-nine subjects given to the Panchayats, there is one prominent omission. It is related to law and order. Without policing, all other functions relating to power projection pale into insignificance. Law and order constitute the backbone of any scheme.
2. A heartening feature of the Act is the reservation of one-third of seats to women but critics ask, is it a myth or reality? Women do go to the Panchayats but only as proxies of their husbands and this negates the rights conferred upon women. There is a provision that all reserved seats will be held in rotation. This means whatever knowledge a person acquires about a given constituency gets nullified because the next time this constituency itself is de-reserved.
3. There is a provision that all MLAs and MPs are the ex-officio members of block and district-level Panchayats where they are allowed to contest elections for these bodies. Needless to say, it would be an unequal competition. The victory of M.P. and MLAs would be a foregone conclusion and this would promote over-centralisation and prevent the emergence of local leadership¹⁵.
4. PRIs cannot become a development outfit, in the absence of service institutions such as the committee of experts to guide them. Since there is no provision in the Act to avail of the services of experts through the formation of committees, the PRIs shall continue to suffer from neglect. It is time that provision is made to enable them to profit from the wisdom of subject experts who would guide the amateurs in the PRIs.
5. Though there is the provision of periodic elections through an election commission, in practice this provision is made use of more in the breach than in the observance and elections do not take place regularly and on schedule. A specific penal provision should be inserted in the Act that those PRIs that fail to conduct elections on schedule, will be deprived of financial assistance. This will have a deterring effect on PRIs because without finances all activities will come to stand still. This would deter PRIs from not holding elections on time.
6. Panchayat leaders, being raw hands, should be provided adequate information and knowledge on the 29 subjects that are under their jurisdiction. It is not unlikely that while legislating on them, the PRI leaders suffer from duplicity and overlapping due to the sheer lack of administrative guidance. It is good to empower PRIs but this should be accompanied by legislative guidance to avoid the perils and pitfalls of lack of knowledge. Devolution of power should be accompanied by measures that would enable them to acquire well in the uncharted sea of administrative opulence of technical skill and technology. Expert guidance is necessary for the leaders of PRIs who are new to the technicalities of administration. The experts should be people of their choice and not the serving bureaucrats attached to the Panchayats because the latter would try to dominate the Panchayat leaders under the guise of assistance. The bureaucrats know that among the PRI leaders, there is an ubiquity of ignorance masquerading under the guise of knowledge and this shortcoming, the service personnel can use to dominate them.
7. There is a woeful lack of district-level planning owing to which administrative targets are not suitably implemented. It is time to make good this deficiency.

¹³ Biju, M.R., Dynamics of New Panchayati Raj System - Reflections and Retrospections, Kanisha Publishers, New Delhi, 1998, P.48.

¹⁴ Alok Pant, Panchayats - An Institutional Myth or a Viable Reality, in M.P. Dube and Munni Padalia's Democratic Decentralisation and Panchayati Raj in India, Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, 2002, P.77.

¹⁵ Vithal C.P., Choudhary R.C. and Jain, S.P. (eds), Pattern of Decentralised Governance, NIRD Hyderabad, P.294.

8. The absence of financial viability hampers the proper functioning of PRIs bodies. The PRIs have no share in budget making. It is imposed on them in the guise of providing financial assistance through a finance commission. Things cannot take off unless the PRIs are entrusted with the task of making their own budget at the district level which can be incorporated into the state-level budget and accordingly, they should be funded. The PRIs know what are their administrative targets that need to be funded. They should, in addition, be adequately empowered to levy more local taxes and collect fees to augment their depleted revenue which would supplement state financial assistance.
9. Facility should be provided to the PRIs to obtain loans from local banks for fulfilling their administrative targets and undertaking development activities.

Proxy Women:

Whereas the number of reservation levels has gone up, there has not been a substantial change in practice because of the domination of male husbands. The words Sarpanchpati and Mayorpati are too frequently used¹⁶. Since many women are new to this kind of legislative business and are newcomers, apart from being illiterate, they have come to depend heavily on their husbands for conducting business. This proxy syndrome continues in northern India. Women do it without understanding that this is a usurpation of their rights which they got after a prolonged constitutional battle. But there are several reasons for this which can be discussed now. The first is the need to protect women, to shield them from the overbearing Panchayat Secretary, usually a serving bureaucrat and the people of his class such as the block development officers. So much so that the states of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh have made it mandatory that elected women be accompanied by their husbands¹⁷. This is largely because in many cases the Secretaries of the Panchayats and their male colleagues threw illiterate women into trouble by asking them to sign blank cheques with the result that many such women suffered jail sentences. In some cases, no-confidence motions were passed against women chiefs on false and trumped-up grounds.

The accompaniment of husbands with their wives has in many cases altered the character of patriarchy and husbands have become supportive of their spouses in domestic work also. Women's status thus gets upgraded in society. This is more so in the case of women who hail from educated families and are literate. Hence they do not remain silent spectators in Panchayats and are found to be fairly principled and assertive. Hence, there is much ado about this proxy women syndrome and it is not all true. The educated women know the legislative process and even not-so-literate women, in the course of time have come to know about many modern institutions such as courts, block development offices, agriculture, and the existence of various offices and officials. It has been an educational experience for them. Moreover, women involve themselves only in issues that are too close to them such as drinking water, the availability of doctors in village health centres and of the teachers in the village schools. Many have shown interest in increasing the income of the Panchayats and generating irrigation facilities for agriculture. They have also focussed on providing monetary help to widows and pensions for aged women who are poor and destitute.

The finest thing about elected women is their accessibility. Village women can easily approach them and induce them to provide services to villagers. Several micro-studies have been conducted that reveal that given a chance, women are second to none and they focus on developmental deeds of Panchayats. In fact, Chattopadhyaya and Duflo point out that women have engineered development programmes and Bishakha Datta points out that women representatives have given priority to need-based programmes and have thereby endeared themselves to their constituents¹⁸. All said and done, the women who got through the reservation channel have acquainted themselves very well and political institutions at the grassroots level have not suffered any diminution or lowering in their status on account of such women representatives. Panchayats today have a separate finance commission and an election commission. Twenty-nine subjects ranging from agriculture improvement to primary education, irrigation, road, old age pension and poverty alleviation have devolved upon Panchayats to make them the real functioning units of governance.

¹⁶ Bidyut Mohanti, Women and Panchayats in India: Creating a New Space for Leaders in Asia, En Seminario Internacional REG GEN: Alternativas Globalizacao, Rio De Janeiro, Brasil, 2005, P.1

¹⁷ Ibid., P.7. Also see Rai, Manoj et. al. (eds) 2001, The state of Panchayats: A Participatory Perspective.

¹⁸ See Buch, Nirmala, Panchayats and Women, in George Mathews (eds), Status of Panchayati Raj in the States of India, Concept, 2000, New Delhi, Datta, Bishaka, 1998, And Who will make the Chapatis? A case study of All Women Panchayats in Maharashtra, Stres Publications, Calcutta, Chattopadhyay, R and Esher Duflo, 2004, Impact of Reservation in Panchayati Raj: Evidence from a Nationwide Randomised Experiment, Economic and Social Weekly.

Upwards Social Mobility:

The number of women in Panchayati Raj is steadily rising and crossed five million. This has created sufficient public space for women. About three million are involved in grassroots institutions and five million have entered politics. This has led to the expansion of social capital and helped in the upward mobility of women in politics on a social scale. One may examine the impact of self-help groups (SHG) on women. They help women in group formation which enables women to speak in village meetings¹⁹. They assist women in procuring micro-credit schemes. These schemes do not automatically ensure a “virtuous spiral of economic, social and political empowerment of women”, but they facilitate the empowering of some women at least. This scheme helps in creating social capital at the communitarian level because it facilitates collectivised efforts. Even the family supports such women who are active in panchayat politics because it enhances family dignity. Small wonder, in villages poor men often transport their wives on their cycles and their in-laws look after the children.

Thus women’s participation in Panchayati Raj bodies has helped them in pursuing the Millennium Development Goals in eradicating hunger and poverty, providing universal primary education and facilitating gender equality. These things are essential for women because, despite many efforts, they still are in a disadvantageous position vis-a-vis man. The maximum numbers of poor are found among women, who are denied health care, proper education and business opportunities. India marked the year 2001, as the year of women’s empowerment. In the year 2011, India implemented a project called UN Women Programme. This programme’s chief aim was to enhance women’s equal political participation in Panchayati Raj institutions. As of now, India’s rank in the gender gap is anything but reassuring. According to the Global Gender Gap Report, 2023, India ranks 127 out of 146 countries²⁰.

Enhanced representation in PRIs is good but not sufficient. A parochial culture, patriarchal dominance and narrow vision of males are responsible for this²¹. There are incidences of apparent change in women’s status due to recent efforts at the empowerment of women, but still, these are not enough and much still needs to be done. In a caste-ridden society, whatever progress has been achieved is due to an induced process of affirmative action. A real change has yet to come, though it must be said in all fairness that reservations in PRIs have opened the door for many more revolutionary changes that are in the offing. It partly helps in neutralising the influence of entrenched upper and middle classes. Duflo and Topalova borrowed the Millennium Survey that covered 36542 households in 2304 villages in 24 states which states that women leaders in reserved Panchayats have provided better and more credible services in respect of roads and drinking water than those in unreserved Gram Panchayats²².

As of now, there is a perceptible change in the scenario but still discrimination persists because as Jairath and Sajja point out “formal institutional arrangements may not adequately reflect the democratisation of society as there is a distinction between making of a democracy and deepening of a democracy”²³. Palanthurai lists thirty types of discrimination in four sample villages, he selected for his study of Tamil Nadu. Illiteracy, proxy representation of women, early marriage, poverty and low status of women in society are the crucial causal factors for this malaise. Lack of awareness about the Panchayati Raj Acts, provisions and schemes further hinders progress towards real empowerment.

PRIs enable women to think freely and provide better services to the community. The National Policy on Education, Government of India 1986 states “Women become empowered through collective reflection and decision-making. Its parameters are building a positive self-image and self-confidence, developing the ability to think critically, building up group cohesion and fostering decision-making and action; ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change; encouraging group action in order to bring about change in the society; providing the wherewithal for economic independence”²⁴.

India today is on a threshold of multiple changes and the progress and empowerment of women may be delayed, but it cannot be denied. In the coming decade, all deprived people shall stake a claim in the power profile of the nation. Already the churning process has begun. The important thing now is that we should cease

¹⁹ Naryana Billava and Nayantara S. Nayak (2013), Empowerment of Women Representatives in Panchayat, Raj Institutions, in the Journal of Politics and Governance, Vol. 5, No. 4, December 1916, Pp. 5-18. Also see Hausmann R, Tyson L.D., and Zahidi, S, (2012). The Global Gender Gap Index 2023, World Economic Forum, Switzerland.

²⁰ World Economic Forum (2023), Global Gender Gap Report 2023. World Economic Forum, Geneva.

²¹ Quoted in Narayana Billava and Nayantara S. Nayak, op.cit., P.9.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., P.13.

²⁴ Quoted in Bidyut Mohanty, op.cit., P.1.

to think parochially and talk of women's empowerment as a matter of right and justice for women. We should equate it with the nation's progress and welfare and stop thinking of it as one involving the emancipation of the neglected section of society only. Drez and Sen have very rightly commented, "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"²⁵.

Suggestions and Synthesis:

When Rajiv Gandhi came to power, he soon realised that unless people are taken into confidence, socio-economic problems would continue to torture people. He wanted to empower people through prosperity. He knew that Indian people, though a traditional lot, cannot forever be silenced and lulled into satisfaction by supernatural stories of apocalypse or Armageddon or earth-swallowing deluge called Pralay. They want to step into modernity from age-old tradition and its archaic myths referred to above. Only a radical change in the perspective of government which would ensure their participation and prosperity can silence them. Panchayats work at the grassroots level and associate people with the task of running government at the local level. It reduces the load of central government and enables people to partake in governance at the grassroots level²⁶.

Till now the position has been one of people receiving government benefits from bureaucrats and officials without taking any responsibility. However, the situation changed after the enactment of the 73rd Amendment. The government has now assumed the role of a facilitator and not a provider. Now it is the people who take the initiative for work, own responsibility and cast off the dependency syndrome²⁷. What matters in the Panchayati Raj system is not just power but "the responsibility which makes the system function effectively. To make the system more effective, the mass has to be motivated"²⁸. For making the system truly people-centric, people are to be oriented to own responsibility for what they do and achieve and the leaders must be goaded to follow a new path. They should be allowed to execute, monitor and evaluate schemes of people's mobilisation. Mahatma Gandhi mobilised people for the liberation of India from foreign yoke, we should teach them to come out of the yoke of ignorance, chains of serfdom and curses of poverty. This is easier said than done and hence a collective effort of government leaders, masses, bureaucrats, voluntary organizations, public activists and academics is needed. The 73rd amendment is a historic step in the direction of revitalising the PRIs. What is needed now is to make people aware of new changes and challenges.

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²⁵ Ibid., P.17

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