

Panchayat Raj Institutions As A Catalyst for Women Empowerment in the State of Tripura

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Abstract

This paper highlights the historical background of Panchayat Raj institutions in India, the role of the 73rd Amendment Act in promoting women's empowerment, and the specific challenges faced in the process. The study aims to examine the impact of the 73rd Amendment Act on women's empowerment and identify the challenges emerging from the process. The methodology involves reviewing secondary sources such as books, reports, research works, journals, and newspapers. The concept of empowerment of women is discussed, emphasizing the need to strengthen them to confront various societal and institutional forces. The paper also reveals the reservations provided for women in Tripura's Panchayat Raj institutions and presents data on the number of elected women members in Village Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zilla Parishads. It concludes with policy recommendations to ensure meaningful participation and empowerment of elected women members. Overall, the study focuses on the progress and challenges of women's empowerment through Panchayat Raj institutions in Tripura.

Keywords: Panchayat Raj institutions, 73rd Amendment Act, women's empowerment, challenges, recommendations

Introduction

In India, the Panchayat Raj Institutions have been in existence from ancient times. In the past, the scope of Panchayat Raj system was confined to solving the social problems with the help of senior members of the village called '*Panchas*'. The British rule caused irreversible damage to these institutions. After Independence the Constituent Assembly set up 8 (eight) major committees to deal with different tasks of Constitution-making. Neither of these committees recommended Panchayat Raj bodies to ensure people's participation in rural development programmes. It was largely through the initiative of K. Santhanam, who always stood for economic and financial decentralization of powers. The resolution on Panchayat Raj was moved by him in the Constituent Assembly. There was an all-round criticism of over-centralization and denial of village government. It was thus village Panchayat found its way in to Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution. Article- 40 of the Constitution says "The state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable to function as local self-government".

In 1956 the Central government appointed Balwant Rai Mehta Committee to review the Community Development Programme. The Mehta Committee submitted its recommendations to the government in 1957. The Committee felt that because of lack of people's co-operation the Community Development Programme could not achieve desired success. Therefore, it recommended Democratic Decentralization in the form of Panchayat Raj bodies to ensure people's participation in rural

development programmes. In January 1958, the National Development Council accepted the recommendation of B.R. Mehta Committee and asked the state governments to activate the process of Democratic Decentralization. As an experiment, the government of Andhra Pradesh, in 1958, implemented the scheme of Democratic Decentralization in certain areas of the state. On October 02, 1959 Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated officially the establishment of Panchayat Raj bodies in Nagaur district of Rajasthan. Thus the idea of '**Democratic Decentralization**' got practical shape in the form of Panchayat Raj Institutions.

Objectives of the study

- i) To examine the role of PRIs regarding women's empowerment.
- ii) To identify the challenges emerging from the process of empowerment through PRIs.

Methodology

This study is basically based on the review of information collected from secondary sources i.e. published books, reports, research works, journals and newspapers. Some information is also collected through internet browsing.

The concept of empowerment of women

Empowerment of women as a concept is of recent origin. But the meaning, theme and the struggle it includes is of ancient origin. The concept of women's empowerment in the modern context can be traced to the latter half of the 1970s when it was increasingly disused and prompted by Third World Feminists and women's organizations. Empowerment of women has become a relevant issue due to the magnitude of women's powerlessness and subordination in the contemporary social context. This term (empowerment of women) is usually used for improving women's conditions, in real sense it may be applied to any disadvantaged group of society for bringing them to the same level of advanced section.

Empowerment of women actually means strengthening them to confront family, community, caste, religion and traditional forces, patriarchal forces and biases working within government Departments. This inevitable confrontation ensures their full participation in every aspect of social, political, and economic development. This participation is necessary to increase the productivity level of women. Thus women's empowerment would mean enlarging the choices and productivity levels of individual women and the collective contribution of women groups.

As per the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** "Woman's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making, including decision making in political process at all levels will be ensured for the achievements of the goals of empowerment."

The **Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD)** called for the recognition that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development, and that empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of societies.

Role of PRIs in women empowerment:

The role of Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in women empowerment initiatives is a significant aspect to consider when studying the impact of PRIs on women's empowerment in the state of Tripura. This

section focuses on exploring the various roles that PRIs play in empowering women and promoting gender their jurisdiction.

1. Enh's political participation: PRIs platform for women to actively participate in political processes at the grassroots level. Through PRIs, women can activities such as contesting elections, being elected as representatives, and holding positions of authority. This political participation empowers women by allowing them to influence policy decisions, advocate for their needs, and challenge traditional gender roles and norms.

2. Facilitating financial empowerment: PRIs have the authority to administer and allocate funds for local development projects. This includes schemes and programs that specifically target women's economic empowerment, such as microfinance initiatives, income generation activities, and skill development programs. By promoting economic opportunities for women, PRIs contribute to reducing gender-based economic disparities and enhancing women's financial independence.

3. Providing a platform for women's voices and concerns: PRIs provide a space for women to express their concerns and participate in decision-making processes. Women representatives in PRIs can advocate for issues related to women's rights, health, education, and safety. Through their active involvement, women are able to highlight gender-specific needs and contribute to policies and programs that address these concerns.

4. Fostering social empowerment: PRIs play a crucial role and transforming social norms and patriarchal structures that hinder women's empowerment. By creating opportunities for women to actively participate in public spaces and decision-making processes, PRIs challenge traditional gender roles, promote women's leadership, and bring about social changes that promote gender equality.

5. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Reservation of seats for women :The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. 1992 is an important step towards women's empowerment. Two decades is too small a unit of a time to review and measure the changes in the situation of women's power. Nevertheless, the redeeming feature of the last 20 years (1993-2013) experiences of enabling and empowering women in local public affairs is encouraging. Despite overall increase in education and political awareness among women in Tripura, their share of power by way of representation in elected offices is very less. From 1963 to 2013 elections of Tripura Assembly, it is found that women held an average of about 03 % of the seats. However, it is found that 50 % of the women leaders have entered Politics through their involvement in PRIs.

The Government of Tripura, in conformity with the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. 1992 and in the existing Tripura Panchayat Act. 1993, provided an opportunity to women to participate in local democratic politics and public affairs. The state thus provided for 33% reservation for women in PRIs. Accordingly, reservations were introduced in 511 Village Panchayats, 23 Panchayat Samities and 4 Zilla Parishads of Tripura. The elections, which were held from 1994 to 2009, paved way for change in the grass-root structures of formal power politics in the villages. In all, 2044 women could get elected in the last PRIs elections - a miracle result of 33 % reservations offered in local bodies indeed.

Table-1
ELECTED WOMEN MEMBERS IN VILLAGE PANCHAYAT

Year	Number of Village Panchayats	Total No. of seats	Number of Elected ST Female	Number of Elected SC Female	Number of Elected GEN. Female	Total Number of Elected Female
1994	525	5427	519	289	1001	1809
1999	537	5685	614	129	1152	1895
2004	513	5352	564	123	1165	1852
2009	511	5295	532	103	1274	1909

Source: Directorate of Panchayat, Govt. of Tripura

Table-2
ELECTED WOMEN MEMBERS IN PANCHAYAT SAMITI

Year	Number of Panchayat Samities	Total No. of seats	Number of Elected ST Female	Number of Elected SC Female	Number of Elected GEN. Female	Total Number of Elected Female
1994	16	196	17	13	37	67
1999	23	299	27	11	68	106
2004	23	299	33	05	68	106
2009	23	299	30	10	67	107

Source: Directorate of Panchayat, Govt. of Tripura

Table-3
ELECTED WOMEN MEMBERS IN ZILLA PARISHAD

Year	Number of Zilla Parishads	Total No. of seats	Number of Elected ST Female	Number of Elected SC Female	Number of Elected GEN. Female	Total Number of Elected Female
1994	3	70	4	4	16	24
1999	4	82	7	2	19	28
2004	4	82	8	3	17	28
2009	4	82	9	1	18	28

Source: Directorate of Panchayat, Govt. of Tripura

The above Tables show that more women have entered in the local bodies and have represented various classes and castes. The 73rd Amendment has led to motivate large number of woman candidates to contest the local elections. This can be considered as the greatest event for women empowerment.

In a bold move with far reaching impact on electoral politics at the grass-root, the Tripura government has made 50% reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions to achieve gender equality in the representation in Panchayat Raj bodies. The state legislature unanimously gave its nod to

the Tripura Panchayat Bill-2010, by amending the Tripura Panchayat Act. 1993 enhancing the quota for women from existing 33% to 50% in March 2010 in the PRIs.

Challenges

As in all such social transformative process, sudden formal empowerment through legislation do not yield intended results. It is a slow and gradual process. It meets several challenges as following.

1. Being a member of rural socio-cultural setting women find themselves in a handicap situation which is an obstacle in the path of women empowerment. This is so because of the fact that rural setting is extremely male-dominated. Hence, we often hear of puppet role of women as panchayat member, behind whom either there is a person like husband, brother, son, father or father-in-laws and so on.
2. The restrictions of social customs, traditions and practices have hindered their real empowerment.
3. Their household role as home-maker and home-keeper is also reported to have come in their way of performance as a panchayat member. This is a general case as most working women of Tripura face this burden of double responsibility.
4. It is feared that the challenges of this relationship of power at home, in society and in office may not change for a long time to come. And, to that extent, their role will remain formal, namesake and restricted.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure a meaningful participation of the elected women members as an essential step to empower them, the following policy prescriptions may be taken into consideration.

1. Roles and responsibilities of the women members should be clearly defined in the manuals and orders of local government, work should be fairly distributed among the male and female members in such a way so that women member can meaningfully participate in all type of functions.
2. **ii)** Specific programmes should be undertaken by the government and non-government organizations in order to create an awareness among the women in grass-root level that political participation would give them an access to the political decision making process relating to the allocation of resources.
3. Mass media should be used to educate and mobilize public opinion in such a way that the realization about the benefits of women's full participation in the national development efforts through politics is created among people.
4. Women should be given various opportunities for leadership training, training regarding the activities of PRIs and education in order to encourage them to take up political and leadership position.
5. Finally, in increasing the number of women in decision-making positions does not itself translate in to greater empowerment for women. Measures to increase the quality of women representatives need to be accompanied by measures to improve the quality of participation.

Conclusion

Women have acquired a legitimate space in rural political institutions that can raise their marginalized position, though they are still a minority. The 50% quota for women is indeed an important impetus to women's empowerment in Tripura. It becomes obvious that the process will take a long time and goal of women's empowerment will not be secured by the quota alone. In order to support and

accelerate the process one has to employ additional strategies, which promote the self-reliance of women (economically as well as socially), build women's capacities and remove structural obstacles.

Women's empowerment is a useful concept because it emphasizes the idea of women as active agents in, rather than passively recipients of development strategies. Therefore, political participation is considered as an essential first step in order to empower women.

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