

Empowerment of Women through Panchayati Raj: A Study of R.S Pura Block

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Abstract

People in the village of India have always managed to solve their problem and settle disputes through village councils or "Gram Panchayats". The word 'Panchayat' designates the decisions of 'Panchs' i.e. the five elderly, learned and wise men. Mahatma Gandhi advocated Panchayati Raj as the foundation of India's political system; it would have been a decentralized form of government where each village would be responsible for its own affairs. The term for such a vision was Gram Swaraj ("village self-governance"). Instead India developed a highly centralized form of government. However, this has been moderated by the delegation of several administrative functions to the local level, empowering elected gram panchayats. There are significant differences between (1) the traditional Panchayati Raj system, (2) that envisioned by Gandhi, and (3) the system formalized in India in 1992. Today Women by getting 33% reservation in the PRI, through 73rd amendment are playing major part in local self government and heading toward women empowerment. This paper is an attempt to understand the Women's role in PRI and how far this institution empowered the women and brought change in their status in family and society at large. Further it will also highlight the challenges faced by Women Panchs.

Keyword: Panchayati Raj, Gram Sabha, Panchs, Empowerment.

Introduction

The history of Institution of Panchayati Raj in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir, can be traced back to the promulgation of the Jammu and Kashmir village Panchayat Regulation No.1 of Samvat 1992 i.e. 1935 A.D. The Regulation is popularly known as Panchayat Raj Act, 1935. (Annual Administration Report of J&K state Samvat 1995-96, October 7, 1938 to October 1939, Jammu and Kashmir, 1940, p.50). As per the preamble of this Act, it is important to establish village Panchayats in Jammu and Kashmir to provide assistance to the administration of civil and criminal justice and also to help them manage the sanitation and other common concern of the villages.(George Mathew,1990:30) In the backdrop of this

demand, the department of Panchayat was established in the then state in the year 1936.(Jammu and Kashmir August,1954,The Directorate of information and Broadcasting Jammu and Kashmir,1954,p.2).

Under the rules of 1935 regulation, the followings criteria's were fixed for the formulation and execution of Panchayati Raj Institution in the state of Jammu and Kashmir like

- According to the Act 1935 Panchayats were assigned the usual civic function and also some judicial responsibilities.
- Panchayat officer given the power to constitute a Panchayat for one village or a number of villages in accordance with rules made by the government.
- Municipal or town area or cantonment could not be included in Panchayat and the regulation provided for election of Panchs numbering five to seven only. Out of these numbers one Panch was to be appointed by the Panchayat Officer or the Wazir-e-Wazarat and the rest were to be elected by a show of hands which is generally a followed procedure.
- Several villages were clubbed together to form one Panchayat and the Sarpanch of that Panchayat was to be elected from amongst the Panchs (Riyaz Punjabi, "Panchayati Raj in Kashmir.
- The qualification prescribed under the act for a voter as well as the person seeking election to a Panchayat is that the person should be a hereditary state subject, should be resident of rural area , was not insane and was of 21 years old, possessing any kind of property worth one thousand rupees.
- Along with said qualifications the person should be tax payer with a minimum tax liability of five rupees and minimum annual income of seven hundred rupees.
- The Academic qualification was also kept mandatory precondition for becoming a voter or contestant in Panchayat election
- The main function of the Panchayat were judicial, under the Act 1935panchayat were empowered to try suit for the recovery of movable property or cash not resulting from a central effecting rights over immovable property for the recovery of damages for misappropriation or without injury to the property, provided that the value of suit did not exceed rupees 25, certain classes of suit had however, been excluded from the cognizance irrespective of value of the subject matter of the suit.
- The Panchayat had also been given power to take cognizance of certain minor offences under the Ranbir Penal Code, the Cattle Trespass Act of Samvat, 1977(1920A.D.) and some other Acts.
- The maximum punishment which a Panchayat could pass was payment of twice the amount of actual damage suffered by the plaintiff or a fine of ten rupees. In spite of this, some Panchayat were specially empowered by the Governor of the province to try civil suit up to the value of rupees 75 and to exercise greater power in trying the offences.

- Panchayat had been also authorized to allow compounding cases and deciding cases by the mutual agreement of the Panchayat and of the parties (Y.R. Sharma, 2002:428).

The duties of the Panchayat included function like construction, improvement and maintenance of bridges and roads and disposal of drainage and maintenance of bridges and roads the disposal of drainage water and sewage, construction and maintenance of source of water, supply and reservoirs of water, establishment and maintenance of burial and burning grounds, elementary education, cleaning of streets, provisions of latrines, maintenance of public libraries and the maintenance of markets (Ibid, section 49).

In 1941 the Panchayati Raj Act of 1935 was amended which was an improvement on the earlier legislative. As per the new amendment to this Act, a Panchayat consisted of partly elected and party nominated membership. Along with this the functions of Panchayat were improved and increased to enable to execute certain works like improvement of communication, water supply, and sanitation. Various administrative duties were also relegated e.g. promotion and encouragement of village industries, the extension of village sites and reregulation of buildings, the protection of village from fire and road, from wild animals and other unforeseen calamities, medical relief, veterinary relief, lighting of public relief and lanes etc and number of villages was also increased under the jurisdiction of the various panchayats. With the passage of time i.e. during 1947, 1951 and later in amended Act of 1989 more changes in the role and duties of the Panchayat Raj System was done to bring more effective contribution and transformation of the society in the rural settings.

In Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs), the representation of women was highly skewed till the enactment of the Panchayati Raj Act (1992), introduced as the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India ensuring 33 percent reservation of seats for women. Clause (3) of Article 243 (D) mandated not less than one - third reservation for women out of the total number of seats of Panches and Sarpanches to be filled by direct election. There was also a provision for giving representation to marginal sections like the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and women belonging to these categories. The state governments in compliance with the Central Act made the necessary amendments in their State Panchayat Acts and elections were held subsequently in accordance with these. In these elections, about 3.4 million representatives were elected throughout India in the local governing bodies including for the first time, 8 lakh women (Chauhan, 1998).

The panchayat elections were held in Jammu and Kashmir in the year 2001 after 1978, in 23 years. In these elections, of the total candidates, only 2.46 percent were women as there was no provision of

reservation of seats for them. Whereas in other parts of India, 33 percent of seats in panchayats were reserved for women, the Panchayati Raj Act of Jammu and Kashmir allowed only for the nomination of women by the state government which was overwhelmingly dominated by men for whom the interests of women remained at the periphery (Shekhawat and Chowdhary, 2004: 46 - 48). Even in the Jammu region where panchayat elections were more successful, out of the 1230 Sarpanch and 10090 Panch constituencies, only 166 women Panch and 7 Sarpanch could win elections (Kumar).

R.S.Pura Block

Ranbir Singh Pura (RS Pura) is a town, near the city of Jammu in Jammu district of the Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory of Indian. It was the first planned city of Jammu and Kashmir, that's why also known as Nawashehar. RS Pura is also one of the major producer of basmati rice.

R. S. Pura is named after the great Dogra ruler Maharaja Ranbir Singh. The total population of R. S. Pura is 163,567 according to 2011 census. R. S. Pura is located at 32.63°N 74.73°E. It has an average elevation of 270 meters above the sea level. The daily mean temperature in this region is 6°C in winter and 44°C in summer.

R. S. Pura Tehsil having 194 villages as per 2011 census. The main languages spoken by the people of this area are Punjabi, Dogri, Hindi, Pahari and Urdu. Suchetgarh border is nearly 35 km from Jammu city and 10.3 km from R. S. Pura.

The major educational institutions of Ranbir Singh Pura are SKUAST- Veterinary College, Govt. Degree College and Govt. Higher Secondary School.

Ranbir Singh Pura had a population of 163567. Males constitute 54% of the population and females 46%. R. S. Pura has an average literacy rate of 70%. Male literacy is 77% and female literacy is 63%. There are about 41,528 houses in the sub- District, including 5761 Urban houses and 35767 Rural houses. Prior to 1947 the state was linked with rest of the country through rail via R. S. Pura only. There existed an old station in the city, which had train services to Sailkot Junction (now in Pakistan). Train's station was at RS Pura, Miran Sahib and Bikram Chowk.

Review of literature

Pamela Singla Rawat (2007) in her study Women Participation in Panchayati Raj: Nature and Effectiveness, Northern India Perspective she looks into the whole issue of women participation in Panchayati Raj institutions in northern Indian state of Haryana. This is characterized by an alarming sex

ratio in favor of men. The participation is not only studied from the angle of elected women member themselves but also the elected men members and public.

Rajesh Kumar Sinha (2018) in his published article Women in Panchayat observed that The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act provided reservation for women in PRIs and later state increases in the quota have led to an unprecedentedly high proportion of women participating in India's political system. There are clear signs that women's leadership in Panchayats, which had a rocky start, is becoming well established and recognised. However, despite facing numerous obstacles like patriarchy, insufficient skills and self-confidence, rotation of terms, etc. EWRs have yet to reach their full potential. The Indian government and state governments are sincerely working to strengthen EWRs through various programmes such as SHGs-PRI convergence, network promotion, capacity building, etc. To give EWRs even more power in the future, much more needs to be done.

Union Minister of State for Panchayati Raj Shri Kapil Moreshwar Patil in a written reply in Rajya Sabha stated that as "Local Government," "Panchayat" is a State subject and is listed in the Constitution's seventh schedule. As a result, subject to the provisions of the Constitution, all Panchayat-related issues, including the representation of women in Panchayat systems, are governed by the relevant State Panchayati Raj Acts and norms. However, through active participation in the Gram Sabha meetings for the creation of Gram Panchayat Development Plans and various programmes being implemented by the Panchayats, the government has been encouraging greater involvement of women in the operation of Panchayats.

P. Srivastva in his article titled 'Political empowerment of Women and Panchayat Raj mentioned that with the introduction of PRIs in our nation, women now have the chance to demonstrate their value as administrators, decision-makers, or leaders. In this regard, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 constitutes a turning point. It gives women a chance to speak up. This experiment is proving to be a huge success, especially by giving women the chance to leave their homes and get involved in the political and administrative spheres

Objectives

1. To know the socio- economic profile of the women Panchs.
2. To know the level and nature of participation of women Panchs in decision making.
3. To understand the level of obstacles and barriers for the women in Panchayat and their role performance in Panchayat.

4. To know the extent of participation and empowerment of women through PRI.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is the specific technique or procedure used to identify select, process and analyse the information regarding the topic. It is the way or science of study regarding how research is done systematically and how data collected, generated and analyzed. It is through the methodology that one explains how the research will be carried out. The present research was conducted in R.S Pura block of Jammu district. Two villages Kherian and upper Ban Sultan were selected for the purpose of the study. In total 15 women elected representatives (Panchs) were selected from both the villages. Purposive sampling technique was used for selecting the sample from the two villages. Interview schedule and focus group discussions were used to get the required information. The interview schedule comprised of sections like socio-economic profile of the respondent, factors affecting women members for performing their roles and expectation and suggestion for better leadership.

Two villages Bansultan and Kharian of R.S Block

According to Census 2011 information the location code or village code of Bansultan village is 006016. Bansultan village is located in Ranbir Singh Pora tehsil of Jammu district in Jammu & Kashmir, India. It is situated 2km away from sub-district headquarter R.s.pura (tehsildar office) and 10km away from district headquarter Jammu. As per 2009 stats, Bansultan village is also a gram panchayat.

The total geographical area of village is 247.3 hectares. Bansultan has a total population of 7,184 peoples, out of which male population is 4,342 while female population is 2,842. Literacy rate of bansultan village is 80.60% out of which 85.91% males and 72.48% females are literate. There are about 1,338 houses in bansultan village.

When it comes to administration, Bansultan village is administrated by a sarpanch who is elected representative of the village by the local elections. As per 2019 stats, Bansultan village comes under Ranbir singh Pura assembly constituency & Jammu parliamentary constituency. Jhammu is nearest town to bansultan for all major economic activities, which is approximately 10 km away. (<https://villageinfo.in/jammu-&-kashmir/jammu/ranbir-singh-pora.html>). The Kharian village is situated 11km away from sub-district headquarter R.s.pura (tehsildar office) and 13km away from district headquarter Jammu. As per 2009 stats, Kharrian is the gram panchayat of Kharian village. The total geographical area of village is 188.6 hectares. Kharian has a total population of 3,176 peoples, out of which male population is 1,626 while female population is 1,550. Literacy rate of kharian village is

83.88% out of which 85.36% males and 82.32% females are literate. There are about 687 houses in kharian village.

Findings

The research study was undertaken in the Kherian and upper Bansultan Panchayat of R.S Pura block of Jammu district which is located 18 km towards the South from the district headquarters of Jammu. The area under study was chosen with the aim as there were many women Panchs who has contested and won the Panchayat elections. In total 15 respondents (elected panchs) were chosen for the interview who had contested and won the Panchayat elections from the said area. Out of total respondents all women Panchs contested the elected under reserved seats. Those who contested and won the Panchayat elections were from schedule caste (reserved category) and five women were from general category, this showed that under the 33% reservation quota more than 33% of the women were from schedule caste category which also revealed the dominance of SC's in the area. All the respondents (elected women) had their own house; none of them was dwelling in rented house which showed that Panchs were not financially poor. Along with the house they also owned the stretch of agricultural land which very clearly showed that they were financially stable.

When asked about the decision making, all the respondents said that they make their own decisions regarding the working of Panchayat, but in terms of decision making in the family only two women said that they do take decisions in family matters which showed that there was prevalence of patriarchal ideology and said panchayats were patriarchal in nature. All the respondents (women panchs) were literate and has done senior secondary, which again showed that they were well aware about their rights and were able to take decisions on their own and can well contribute in working of the panchayats, but on the other hand it was found that there was role conflict as they have to work on the position of Panch as well as have to share the burden of maintaining the home, children elderly etc. The biggest challenge they faced was the lack of training which is much required and they also said that government should increase their salaries and there is dire need to increase the allocation of funds for the development of their areas as well.

Conclusion

In India the position of women is not equal to the men and are in much low level not only in terms of literacy rate, sex ratio, workforce participation but also in terms of their access to political structure (political participation) which truly guides development programmes of the society. Since access to political participation and political decision-making processes are vital components of an autonomy and

capability, discrimination in this regard leads to under representation and wastage of women's potential and efficiency which are very important for the holistic development of the country. Thus it become pertinent to involve the women a decision making process at all levels to bring their demands in national agenda. In order to ensure women participation and empowerment in the political bodies, 33% reservation of seats for the women at all level was taken by different women organizations and social activists. As per the 73rd Constitutional amendment mandating reservation of one third of seats of women in all village and block and district level elected bodies. The role of female Panchayat members (Panchs) in decision-making process has been examined on the basis of data collected through the interviews of Panchs of two villages. The data showed that 33% reservation of the women's seat in PRI was strictly implemented and women Panchs after contesting and winning the election gained status in the family as well as in the society although they faced some of the implications of the patriarchal ideology which was found to be prevalent in these areas. The Panchs also revealed that they play very important role in decision-making in the working of the Panchayat which became only possible because they are literate and understand the importance of being in power to bring change in their status through PRI. It was also found in the study that certain challenges were faced by them like lack of training, financial constraints, prevalence of patriarchal ideology and rigidity of family structures etc. Women Panchs demanded for the proper training facilities and allocation of more funds for the overall development of the area, which showed that still there are many lacunae which need to be dealt for the proper democratic de-centralization of power and transformation of the society through the institution of PRI.

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