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POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN PNACHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS: AN OVER VIEW**DR. M. GOPI****POST DOCTORAL FELLOW & FACULTY****DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION****ANDHRA UNIVERSITY****WALTAIR JUNCTION****ABSTRACT**

The study finds that though the representation of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions is slowly increasing, but their involvement in political participation and decision making process is not up to the expectation. They are not able to do themselves. The male member should extend their co-operation to their counter parts. Simple political participation is not essential, but the female members are in the Panchayat Raj Institutions having active involvement and participation is also essential. There is general impression among the public that women politicians are not independently acting by themselves, they are not enjoying power. The actual power plays in the hands of the male members like their husbands, brothers and fathers. This practice should not be continued and women must come forward to participate and take decisions independently.

KEYWORDS

political empowerment, panchayati raj institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment as a phenomenon is not something absolutely new. It has been there throughout history in almost all societies for variety of reasons. What could be considered as new is it's increasingly coming out in public, it's having been shifted and reshaped from women welfare to their development to now women's empowerment and it's being discussed, reported and critically evaluated. What are rather recent is the identification of the girl children and women as a special group and the acknowledgement internationally of the importance of specific focus on the critical and key issues related with the empowerment of women.

Empowerment has become a fashionable and buzz word. It essentially means decentralization of authority and power. It aims at getting participation of deprived sections of people in decision making process, in other words giving voice to voiceless. Activists want Government empower poor people including women by legislative measures and welfare programmes, unless capacity is built in these sections in reality the power is used by others rather than the section for which they are meant. Empowerment is a process that enables women to gain access and control of material intellectual and human resource. Throughout much of the world, women's equality is undermined by historical imbalances in decision-making power and access to resource rights and entitlements for women either by law or by custom; women in many countries still lack of rights to. Empowerment is the redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance.

Political empowerment of women is part of the overall empowerment process. Political participation is a major path to women's empowerment and participation in the decision-making process or increased decision-making power will lead to women's empowerment in the true sense of the term. In other words, increased decision-making power gives greater ability to influence matters that affect our lives in the community and the society at large. In the broad sense, participation in politics goes far beyond electoral politics: voting and election to public office. Indeed, their role in public life is limited to casting votes during elections. They are denied opportunities to participate in the decision-making process. Even when the decisions are to affect their well-being, they are only passive observers. The primary challenge facing women today, therefore, is to increase their participation in that they get hold of the situation and become actively involved in the process of decision-making.

Much more work needs to be done at the grass-root levels specially in the thousands of Indian villages. The village workers through living and working alongside the villagers act not merely as advisors and technical assistants but also work to promote a sense of self-reliance and communal responsibility amongst the villagers that transcends divisions of family, caste, class, religion and gender. In working to encourage the participation of villagers in collective decision making process, particular attention is paid to position of women whose domestic responsibilities, allied to the discouragement of men, have traditionally precluded them from participation in decision making at the community level. In encouraging the women to meet together for such purposes a forum is created wherein they gain confidence in their own abilities and collective strength and thus being to make their voice heard in community affairs and in Panchayat deliberations (usually dominated by men).

The ultimate goal of empowerment of women based on Gandhi's vision is "Sarvodaya", the welfare of all through cooperation and trusteeship in the economic sphere, equal participation in the political sphere and mutual in the social sphere without regard to caste, creed, or class or gender. Thus, empowerment of village women cannot be imposed from above, it must grow from the bottom upwards.

A number of studies on political participation have shown that women in general are less participative in politics than men. It is usually argued, to explain this, that women are less educated and hence less informed of political issues; less attentive to different points of view and hence are less interested in politics – all in relation to men. Such an explanation, however, would be oversimplification of the fact. The lack of participation of by women in the political process cannot simply be attributed to their nature, which is said to be basically conservative. In fact, one should also take into consideration the factors of political resources and political interest in order to understand the gender-bias in political participation and also the reasons for the consequent under representation of women still possess fewer political resources than men. They have to be engaged in constant battles against a number of social, economic and political obstacles even today.

Under normal circumstances, women lack the political efficiency associated with political participation. Political efficacy is basically the extent to which an individual feel that his or her political participation will be meaningful. The fact that women are less likely to have such a meaning can have many reasons. One of the reasons may probably be the childhood socialization of girls to the view that both interest and activity in politics go more with males than females. Again, women's interest in formal politics is very often crushed by childbearing, raising the kids, home-making responsibilities, and so on. Besides, women, who are not employed outside home, may be said to have less interest in politics, to acquire less politically relevant political events, and to be less likely to develop the skill necessary for successful political activism. This may, more or less, be equally true for women employed outside home.

It is universally accepted that education, employment, health care and other facilities for women should follow one another in a meaningful way. But the social milieu is hardly conducive to moving towards an environment of substantive equality for women with men in all spheres of life. It is evident from the UNDP Human Development Reports that women are discriminated against males everywhere – home, workplace or in the community – and are consistently deprived of their share in decision-making in organizations. The picture is not much brighter even in the western countries. The fact remains that constitutional or legal equality may be conducive but not necessarily leads to substantive equality of women regarding decision making.

Poor and in egalitarian work conditions, illiteracy and lack of job skills, low nutrition and high morbidity among women contribute to the overall poverty and poor health record of women all over the world, particularly in the third world countries like India. Besides, cuts in public and social sector spending on education, health care and child care after the global advent of liberalization policies particularly damage the conditions of women because of their dual responsibility as wage-earners and house-keepers, as in health conditions, a gender gap clearly visible in education as well. In India, the adult literacy rate for women stands at 65.46 percent, compared to 82.14 percent for men. The combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio for girls stands at 64.64 percent, compared to 80.89 percent for boys.

It is true that this gender gap in health, education and political participation is gradually decreasing (but not up to the mark). Though slowly, women in different parts of the world are tending to shed their traditional role and entering the diverse spheres of life, opening different windows in their minds. Movements for women empowerment in different parts of the world are playing prominent roles. But there is a lot yet to be achieved by women.

INDIAN WOMEN AND PANCHAYATI RAJ POLITICS: A PRE-RESERVATION PICTURE

The state machinery of India, from the very beginning, has tried to establish gender equality in many ways. In Part-III (Fundamental Rights) of our Constitution, equality of citizens irrespective of sexes has been established in unequivocal terms. Yet, the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI), after conducting an extensive review of the situation of women in India in 1974, found in its report entitled *towards equality* that the constitutional guarantee of equality had 'remained an unrealized dream' for the vast majority of Indian women. It has been observed that neither the norms nor the institutions were in a place that would enable women to fulfill the multiple roles that they were expected to play.

Subsequently, a National Policy on Education was undertaken which envisaged a positive interventionist role for education in the empowerment of women. The National Perspective Plan for Women was implemented in 1988. The National Commission for Women was set up in 1992. All such efforts were intended to improve the existing situation regarding the status of women. The local self government has been embodied as an 'aspiration' in the Constitution of India in 1950. The power to implement it was devolved to States. The first generation panchayats following the Balwantrao Mehta Committee Report had a chequered career. The second generation panchayats, which were created as a follow-up of the Ashok Mehta Committee has not better fate, with the minor exceptions of West Bengal and Karnataka.

In West Bengal, elections to the local bodies were held at regular intervals. Considerable quantity of power was devolved to these elected bodies. But the panchayat bodies in West Bengal, just like those in the rest of India, reflect utterly poor representation of women. Professor Sonali Chakravarti Banerjee explains it in the following way. "In modern India, women came to public life first through the freedom movement and then through the chances offered by universal franchise and other modernizing socio-political forces. In the process, India has received a few nationally important women leaders, though the egalitarian spirit has hardly percolated down to the grass roots levels. In this sense, therefore, the study of the gender composition of Panchayati leadership is also a study of the interplay between tradition and modernity in a changing rural society". Her study confirms the singularly strong sexist bias prevalent in the three-tier Panchayati Raj in India during the preservation period. It is, indeed, remarkable that there has not been a single woman leader in the Hugli Zilla Parishad since its inception (1978) till 1988. All the Sabhadhipatis and Sahakari Sabhadhipatis have only been males since 1978. Thus, the Zilla Parishad leadership has been a male monopoly sector in the absolute sense of the term. Even among the ordinary elected members, there have been very few women. In 1978, no woman was elected to the Zilla Parishad, while in 1983 and 1988 the number of elected female members was 3 and 1, respectively.

Chakravarti Banerjee's study (2002) reveals that this gross under representation of women is equally pronounced at the Panchayat Samiti level also. In 1983, there was no woman in the leadership positions in any of the Panchayat Samitis. All the Sabhapatis and Sahakari Sabhapatis in the 18 Panchayat Samitis of the Hugli district were males only. In 1988, out of 582 Panchayat Samiti seats, only 3 went to women. Thus, women claimed only 0.5 percent of the total number of Panchayat Samiti seats. No wonder that their share in the leadership positions came to a naught.

The position of women had rather improved at the Gram Panchayat level in the later years. In 1978, there were 8 elected women out of the 2887 elected Gram Panchayat members in the district. No woman was made either Pradhan or Upa-Pradhan in any of the Gram Panchayats in the first panchayat election (1978). In 1983 also, there was no woman Pradhan or Upa-Pradhan in the district of Hugli. In 1988, however, the total number of elected women members in Gram Panchayat tier came up to 24 (out of a total of 3437 seats). Out of these 24 elected women again, one was elected as Pradhan and three as Upa-Pradhans.

Broadly speaking, the data presented above establish the absolute marginalization of women in the Panchayati Raj before the formula of reservation was imposed from above.

Such a finding regarding the gender bias of the Panchayati Raj organization in the pre-reservation phase confirms similar findings obtained by other studies in this and allied fields. Studies of traditional rural societies have almost everywhere noted the inherent male biases of the social organizations. In the specific case of the Panchayat Raj in India, scholars have detected the same gender bias at every level. A case study conducted in the 1950s in the Jaunpur district of Uttar Pradesh during the local body elections there found that "... it was a male-dominated election of the forty-nine candidates who ran for office and not a single one was a woman. In interview after interview, the women voiced surprise at the notion of voting in any other way than way than the husband or the male family head or in a way contrary to his wishes or directions. The women were prevailingly aware of the rivalry of A and B and of the stand of their families in respect to these two office speakers. But they were usually uninformed about the contests for panchayat membership in the district and confused about the identities of the candidates. When they were asked for whom they would vote, a common answer was that they would be told what to do by the senior males of the family when the time came.

In a subsequent study conducted in Rajasthan in the 1970s, Bhargava also found the political arena to be a domain of male sex. Bhargava did not find any elected woman at the village Panchayat level or at the Zilla Parishad level, though he could find one elected member in one Panchayat Samiti. He rightly concluded that 'in the rural areas when a woman enters into politics, she is taken as an exception'.

In sharp contrast to most other regions of India, the Bengal society in the nineteenth century witnessed several social reform movements for the emancipation of women. But in spite of such an enlightened tradition, however, the male bias of the culture remained pronounced. While identifying the 'dominant elite' of the towns and villages of Bengal at the beginning of the twentieth century, Broomfield referred to them as 'the Bhadrakol, literallythe gentlemen', as opposed to the ladies. The freedom movement gave birth to some remarkable women freedom fighters, but it was mostly the middle class urban women who came to the forefront during this period and the rural traditions were kept intact.

In an article by Sushil K. Dey, an architect of the Community Development Programme in West Bengal, one can find perhaps the first concrete reference to a female leader in the rural self government of our province. Dey referred to one village called Sukna, where an aboriginal woman of middle age emerged to leadership when she kept the men on a job of restoring a derelict pond by threatening a strike of all housewives if they left it for other attraction. She has been wise and prominent in village councils since then.

After the panchayat election in 1978, the Government of West Bengal studied the working of the Gram Panchayats in 1980 and found that 'all the elected members of the Gram Panchayats excepting a few happen to be male.' G.K Lieten (1992) devoted considerable amount of attention to the gender issue in panchayats and noted the quasi-complete absence of women in the Panchayati Raj organizations in the State. Out of the 480 candidates for Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti elections in the area under his study, as many as 478 were males. Lieten even observed that many political leaders and candidate did not seem to be aware of the necessity to induce women into all spheres of public life as one of the means of eliminating the gender discrimination. Neil Webster (1992) was equally emphatic in denouncing the gender discrimination in West Bengal Panchayats. He noted that women have largely failed to gain representation in Panchayats because of the social structure and cultural practices against any woman candidate. The semi-official Mukarji-Bandyopadhyay Report (1993) also observed that 'largely because of societal constraints, there are very few women in the Panchayats at present, and even fewer in key positions. Women's representation is less than one percent of the total elected Panchayat members.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION FOR THE UPLIFT OF WOMEN

The Indian Constitution specifically provides for the protection of the rights of the women. The Constitution-makers knew that within the given socio-cultural order, it might not be possible for women to get gender justice. They suggested special provisions for women on the lines of other weaker sections of society, especially in the Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution. Various important Articles have accordingly been introduced to provide protective discrimination and to promote and protect the interests of the new protagonist – the woman.

Article 10 of our Constitution ensures equality of women and their equal protection before the law. Articles 14 and 15 guarantee a life of dignity without discriminating against women on the basis of religion, race, sex, belief, faith or worship, Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, sex, caste, birth and a number of other factors. Article 15(3) categorically States: 'Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and

children'. Article 16 focuses on the specific subject of equality in public employment. Article 16(1) seeks to guarantee equality of opportunity in such employment. Article 16(2) prohibits discrimination in public employment on grounds of religion, race or sex.

In this context, it will be relevant to see what Article 40 (Directive Principles of State Policy) of our Constitution states:

"The State shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government."

To achieve this aim, the 73rd Amendment has been introduced to the Constitution of India to ensure the representation of women in the various statutory bodies of local self government. All the States adopted the new panchayat legislation by 23rd April, 1994.

THE PROVISIONS OF THE 73rd CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT ACT

- * Not less than one-third of the seats have been reserved for women (including that of SCs and STs) and these may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies of a panchayat.
- * In proportion to the population of SCs and STs in an area, seats have been reserved for SCs and STs. There is reservation for women in these seats allotted to SCs and STs. Not less than one-third of the total number of seats may be reserved for women.
- * Not less than one-third of the total number of seats for the offices of the chairpersons of each level has been reserved for women. This will be rotated among different panchayats at each tier – Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad.
- * There are certain general features, which could be taken advantage of by women, such as direct elections for membership and Sarpanch (President) posts, at the grass roots (Gram Panchayats) as well as the intermediate (Panchayat Samiti) levels.
- * It has been left to the different States to provide for reservation for membership as chairperson to those hailing from backward classes, if they choose so.

81st AMENDMENT BILL

Another important endeavour in the direction of women's upliftment is the 81st Amendment Bill for 33 percent women's reservation in Parliament and State Legislatures. It was introduced for the first time in 1996 in the Lok Sabha. After much debates, the Bill was referred to a Select Committee. The passage of this Constitutional Amendment Bill [Article 330(A)], however, has been deferred again and again. The main objection is the exclusion of reservation for women in minority and the backward groups, specially the OBCs. Some important features of the 81st Constitution Amendment Bill are as under:

- * 33 percent seats to be reserved for women in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.
- * One-third of these seats to be reserved for SC/ST women.
- * Bill not to be applied to States/Union Territories, where seats reserved for SC/STs is less than three.

India's search for the goal towards gender equality and gender justice began with the establishment of the Central Social Welfare Board in 1953. The concept of national machinery for women's uplift has been evolving ever since. A Department of Women and Child Development was set up in 1985 under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Besides several Constitutional and legal measures, the State has also initiated several schemes and programmes at the micro-level such as the *Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWACRA)*, *Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)*, *Mid-day Meals*, *Education for the Girl Child and Micro-credit*, specially targeted at the marginalized women.

The advocates of women's movements all over the world are moving towards the understanding that the demands for women's rights, namely equality of participation, opportunity and agency in all spheres of life should be directed primarily to institutions that constitute the structure of society and set the agenda of women's lives.

The National Perspective Plan for Women's Development 1988-2000 had been formulated in 1988. "The Shramshakti Report" also appeared in the same year. By an Act of Parliament, the National Commission for Women came into effect in 1990 to investigate and examine all matters relating to the safeguards provided to women under the Constitution and other laws.

In view of her commitment to various international conventions, India designed a National Policy for Empowerment of Women in 1996. **The Policy categorically stipulated that:**

- * Human rights and fundamental freedom for women on equal basis with men need to be ensured.
- * All forms of violence against women-physical, mental, domestic or social-need to be eliminated.
- * No discrimination would be allowed in law or practice against women.
- * All forms of discrimination against and violation of the rights of girl child would be eliminated by undertaking strong steps including punitive ones.
- * Synergy of development measures would be designed for holistic empowerment of women.
- * Women's active participation in the decision-making is to be ensured.
- * Policies, programmes and systems would be established in order to ensure mainstreaming of women's perspective.
- * Gender sensitization programmes would be conducted on regular basis for all sections of the society.
- * Media should be used to portray a positive image of women.
- * For eradication of poverty and provision for women's basic needs, several programmes should be initiated in order to (a) alleviate poverty, (b) provide food security, (c) arrange housing and shelter, (d) provide equal education, (e) formulate a holistic approach to women's health, (f) formulate macro-economic and social policies by institutionalizing women's participation in economic development and (g) arrange support services like child care facility, etc. to enable women to participate effectively in developmental processes and to provide special attention to the needs of women in providing safe drinking water, sewage disposal and sanitation.
- * Women's perspective would be reflected in the policies and programmes for eco-system management.
- * Diversity of women's situation is to be acknowledged and special programmes need to be made available for women in the disadvantaged group.
- * Budgetary provision is to be enhanced in the programmes related to women.
- * Non-Governmental Organizations are to be involved in the formulation and implementation of all policies and programmes affecting the women.
- * Gender development indices would be developed by the government.
- * Desegregated gender studies would be collected, compiled and published regularly.
- * International, regional and sub-regional cooperation for the empowerment of women will be strongly encouraged.

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women (1996) has suggested elaborate strategies and action plans to actualize the prescribed goals. It has an action plan to be initiated at the grass roots, district/sub-district, State and National levels. For the State and National levels, the policy suggests that there would be Councils for giving broad policy advice, guidance and directions. It also suggests that all the Central and State Ministries would have the gender component in their action plans. It suggests elaborate action for the Executive and Legislature in all the areas related to physical, social, cultural, and economic and livelihood security of women.

The National Policy States that at 'the grass roots, women will be organized into self-help groups at the Anganwadi level. These women's groups will be helped to institutionalize themselves into registered societies and to federate at the block/town level. Such societies will bring about synergistic implementation of all the social and economic development programmes by drawing resources made available through government and non-government channels, including banks and financial institutions; and by establishing a close interface with the panchayats/municipalities'.

The *National Commission for Women (NCW)*, which was basically a statutory body, was constituted by the government in January, 1991. It was constituted with a specific mandate to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal safeguards provided for women; to review the existing legislation to suggest amendments wherever necessary; and to look into complaints involving deprivation of the rights of women. Similar Commissions have also been set up in nine States. The NCW has taken up a number of activities, some of which are as under:

- * Setting up of 11 expert committees to tender advice on various women's issues.
- * Conducting pariwarik lok adalats.
- * Making complaints and pre-litigation cells.
- * Creating legal awareness.
- * Welfare of women prisoners and under trails.
- * Action of issues of women and children.

In order to coordinate and integrate components of all sectoral programmes and to facilitate their convergence to empower women, Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY) was launched as a strategy on 20th August, 1995. It proposed to bring out a mechanism by which there could be a systematic coordination and a meaningful integration of various programmes of different sectors to meet women's needs and to ensure that women's interests were taken care of and provided for under each scheme. It was proposed that the mechanism would be operated at the district level as a sub-plan for women to percolate down to the village level appropriately through the Indira Mahila Kendras (IMKs) at village level and Indira Mahila Block Mendras (IMBKs) at block level. The ultimate objective of Indira Mahila Yojana is to empower women by ensuring their direct access to resources through a sustained process of mobilization and convergence of all the ongoing sectoral programmes. The IMY is sought to be operated as a central sponsored scheme. The three basic constituents of IMY are as follows:

- * Convergence of inter-sectoral services
- * Income generation activities
- * Sustained process of education/awareness generation

Under the proposed convergence of inter-sectoral services, IMY will provide the umbrella cover and all sectoral programmes aimed at women's welfare, including non-formal education, training, formal primary education, skill development, health, family welfare programmes and other minimum needs programmes like drinking water, sanitation, housing roads, electrification, etc. would converge at the village level as per the needs, demands and requirements articulated by the IMY. Income generation activities include creation of employment opportunities through group-dynamics and participation in a broad range of economic activities suited to the local requirements. Under a sustained process of education/awareness generation, the IMY seeks to create a general awareness among women through ensuring information specific to the equality of social status, legal rights, like those of property and inheritance, constitutional safeguards and on different development programmes or issues concerning women.

The Constitution (one hundred and tenth amendment) Bill, 2009 was enhanced reservation for women in Panchayats at all tiers from 1/3 to at least 50 per cent," The provision of reserving half the seats for women in Panchayats will apply to the total number of seats filled by direct election, offices of chairpersons and seats and offices of chairpersons reserved for SCs and STs. Information and Broadcasting Minister Ambika Soni called it "a path breaking decision". Neeraja Chandroke of the organization Stree Sakthi said: "This is a good move, provided male relatives of these women representatives don't indulge in backseat driving."

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: SOME PROBLEMS AND CONSTRAINTS

The rosy picture regarding women's participation in the Panchayat Raj Institutions is not without problems and inherent constraints.

- * In the first place, over the last fifty years or so, the governmental structure of our State has remained more or less the same with a considerable continuity with the colonial past. Though a number of policies have been formulated and reformulated for the empowerment of women, the agencies for the implementation of the policies have remained unchanged. Hence, there have not been much qualitative changes in the status of women belonging to the marginalized groups of society. Immediately after independence, the women of the marginalized groups have faced the forces of modernity. They have been victimized both because of being women and because of being members of the oppressed sections of the society. The various social ills like poverty, unemployment, non-recognition of work, low wages, illiteracy, ignorance, ill-health and the absence of basic amenities of life have been cruelly heaped on them.
- * Secondly, many steps in the empowerment of women have been taken in India and many more still required. The constitutional and non-constitutional initiatives have been many, but these have been stricken with various loopholes. The National Policy for Empowerment of Women says very little on grass roots mobilization and resources for the betterment of women. The panchayat bodies are not free from the clutches of the traditional bureaucratic control. The local power lobby also uses its manipulative tactics to retain its influence. It provides ready base for the integration of local labour and some other productive resources with the national and global forces to maximize its own class interests. It still maintains its domination in society. Only through sustained grass roots mobilization, the rising gender consciousness at the grass roots can encounter these forces like local power lobby.
- * Thirdly, instances of caste and gender-based atrocities can be cited from many States of India. In Madhya Pradesh, for instance, the aftermath of elections to the panchayats, held in the beginning of the twenty-first century in four of its districts i.e., Raigarh, Chhatatpur, Raisen and East Nimar saw ugly abuses of authority. The incidents of a lady Sarpanch being paraded naked, another lady Sarpanch being gang-raped, an Upa-Sarpanch being tortured and a dalit panchayat member being beaten up, have come into limelight.
- * Fourthly, the implementation of several Acts of Parliament pertaining to the protection of women has been thoroughly ineffective. The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls, 1956 has not been able to arrest the problem of trafficking and prevent the exploitation of women. The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 has not been systematically enforced. The National Commission of Women Act (1990), which empowers the National Commission of Women to investigate, examine and review all matters relating to safeguards provided for women under the Constitution and other relevant laws, is not satisfactory according to the National Commission of Women. The commission feels that it should have the power to prosecute the summarily decide on cases of violation of gender justice. Again, there should be commission for women at State and District levels as well.
- * Fifthly, studies conducted in various parts of the country bring forth the gender insensitivity of the grass roots workers, illiteracy, lack of training of the marginalized women at the grass roots and the prevailing ideology of patriarchy and gender segregation. These factors have contributed towards the process of marginalization of women who belong to the more deprived sections of the society. Again, there are several financial and infrastructural constraints in women's empowerment in panchayat bodies. Attitudes of administrators towards the gender question, which have been stated to be traditional and stereotyped, are also considered to be an inherent problem in women's empowerment.

There are a number of myths, expresses about women and their participation in governance in India, particularly when the question relates to rural women who have low literacy rates and numerous social restrictions and other socio-economic handicaps. We identified at least four such myths about women's participation in the panchayat raj institutions:

- * Women's passivity and disinterest in political institutions.
- * Only the well-to-do, upper strata women will come through reservations.
- * Only privileged kins-women of powerful politicians will enter these political institutions to keep the seats for them.
- * Women who have entered the panchayats are only proxy and namesake numbers. They do not participate in panchayat activities.

SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTIONS

- * The rate of literacy among women should be increased.
- * Women should come out of the traditional attitudes custom and practices.
- * Political awareness should be increased among the women.
- * Women should come on their own accord and compete along with them by developing willpower and confidence.
- * Women should organize and establish network at different levels to influence the political participation process. There is a great need to increase solidarity among women's groups for the cause of women.

- * Expansion of educational opportunities for women, greater recognition of their unpaid work, wider representation in electoral politics, legislative and legal mechanism to safeguard their rights and equal opportunities for participation in politics are some other things which would strengthen the process of political empowerment of Women.

CONCLUSION

Though the representation of women in Panchayat Raj Institutions is slowly increasing, but their involvement in political participation and decision making process is not up to the expectation. They are not able to do themselves. The male member should extend their co-operation to their counter parts. Simple political participation is not essential, but the female members are in the Panchayat Raj Institutions having active involvement and participation is also essential. There is general impression among the public that women politicians are not independently acting by themselves, they are not enjoying power. The actual power plays in the hands of the male members like their husbands, brothers and fathers. This practice should not be continued and women must come forward to participate and take decisions independently.

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