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**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PANCHAYAT
RAJ AND ERSTWHILE SYSTEM EMPOWERING
RURAL WOMEN AT THE GRASS ROOT LEVEL
DEMOCRACY OF INDIA**

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ABSTRACT

India is a country having more than 6 lac villages in which as per 2011 census, 68.84% of her population reside. Women in Indian rural area comprise 48.6% of her total rural population. Democracy is often regarded as the most popular form of government as it ensures participation of all people. The health of any democracy can be gauged from the participation of women in the democracy of the Country. The word ‘panchayat’ holds a distinguishable position in the Indian democratic set up and the reference of the same can be traced from the time of the rig Veda. Empowerment is the best answer to all kinds of oppression and other societal maladies prevalent in the society. Women though constituting half of the population have always suffered due to lack of opportunities being given to them. The 73rd Constitutional amendment of India introduced the Panchayat Raj system making room for women reservation in the same. This paper endeavors to check the efficacy of Panchayat Raj System in Empowering Rural Women at the grass root level democracy of India.

Key words: Women, Rural area, Democracy, Patriarchal perspective, the Constitution of India, Panchayat Raj system, Women reservation, participation and empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

“Woman is the builder and moulder of a nation’s destiny. Though delicate and soft as a lily, she has a heart, far stronger and bolder than of man. She is the supreme inspiration for man's onward march, an embodiment of love, pity and compassion, she is no doubt, her commanding personality; nevertheless, is grimly by solemn – Great poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.¹

India’s democratic set up being the largest in the world, has three levels of governance i.e., Parliament at the national level, State Legislature at the state level and local self-government or Panchayat Raj and Municipality systems at the grass roots level. The Panchayat Raj system is run at the grass root village, development block and district level by the local people by their elected representatives in the concerned locality to deal with their day to day life and ordinary problems.

¹ Quoted in Devi and Lakshmi 1

Municipalities or Nagar Palika system on the other hand is run in the towns and cities. Article 40, a directive principle of the Constitution of India mandates the State to take steps to organize village Panchayats and in the 1993 by virtue of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the Panchayat Raj system with special reservation of seats in favor of women got inserted in the Constitution of India as Article 243-243O². This local form of government is a State list³ subject and so the State legislature can provide for the same by laws.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Whether the Panchayat Raj and erstwhile system empowering rural women at the grass root level democracy of India has been successful in their attempts?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To check the efficacy of ‘Panchayat Raj System’ in women empowerment at the grass root level democracy of India;
- 2) To check the efficacy of the erstwhile systems empowering rural women in India;
- 3) To determine the challenges in empowering rural women through ‘Panchayat Raj System’ along with possible measures to do away with such challenges;
- 4) To have a comparison between the present Panchayat Raj system and the erstwhile systems in as much as it relates to empower the rural women in the decision making process at the grass root level democracy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research method for carrying out this work is doctrinal research method. The paper has been made based on existing literatures. Both primary and secondary sources have been used to collect materials along with adopting analytical, descriptive and informative methods. Analytical, descriptive and informative methods have also been adopted for this work. The e-books, journals,

² The Constitution of India, Part IX

³ 7th Schedule of the Constitution of India, State List

articles, books, various reports of various authorities, various trending news in reputed newspapers pertaining to empowerment of rural women have helped tremendously to make this work up to the mark.

STATUS OF INDIAN WOMEN AT VILLAGES BEFORE THE CONSTITUTIONAL INTRODUCTION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ SYSTEM

The participation of women in political process has a long chequered history. In the early Vedic period, Women had a special place in the society and actively participated in the public affairs. This situation of women considerably reduced with the advent of Muslim invaders and the rules pertaining to the women folk became considerably rigid. During the Mughal period, seclusion of women was taken as a symbol of respect and pride among the higher class. The Indian independence movement gave a huge impetus to the women participation in the political process; Indian women for the first time got the opportunity to cast their vote in the election of Madras in the year 1921.

The Constitutional provision and measures had not helped much to play a direct and dominant role in political life. Though Panchayati Raj system is age old, the place of women in the same was not granted. The initiative of providing an opportunity to women in the village Panchayats was for the first time taken up by Balwant Rai Mehta committee in 1957. Maharashtra was the first state which introduced the provision for the nomination of one or two women to each tier of the Panchayati Raj Institution. The provision of co-option could not bring a sea of change in the inclusion of members to the Panchayat raj institution. The women members were mostly from influential political families of the village and were called only when there was a problem associated with the quorum. The women members were consequently not aware of the rights, duties or the functioning of the Panchayat.

Women representation in Lok Sabha during 1952-1991 is shown in the following table:

TERMS OF LOK SABHA	PERCENTAGE OF FEMALES TO TOTAL SEATS	TERMS OF LOK SABHA	PERCENTAGE OF FEMALES TO TOTAL SEATS
1952-57	2.8	1977-80	3.5
1957-62	3.6	1980-84	5.3
1962-67	6.0	1984-89	7.7
1967-71	6.0	1989-91	4.4
1971-77	3.8	1991-	7.2

Source: E. K. Santha (1995) 'Participation of women in Panchayat Raj; A status Report submitted to National Commission for Women, through institute of Social Sciences'.

In the year 1991, 73rd Constitutional Amendment Bill was placed before the Parliament, and finally after incorporating suggestions of the joint committee, the bill was passed in the Parliament on 23rd December and came into force from April 1993.

EMERGENCE OF PANCHAYAT RAJ SYSTEM IN INDIA

The Panchayat Raj system is a south Asian political system prevalent mainly in nations such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal etc. Panchayat Raj can safely be recognized as the oldest system of local government in the Indian Sub-continent. Panchayati Raj is synonymous to democratic decentralization. India has a chequered history starting from self-sufficient and self-governing village communities. The evolution of Panchayat Raj System in India may be seen as follows:

VEDIC PERIOD

The history of Panchayat Raj System can be traced from the time of the time of the RIG VEDA. In the RIG VEDA mention about self-sustaining and self-governing village communities known

as sabha is found. The references of the same can also be traced from the Manusmriti, Arthashastra etc.⁴

EPIC PERIOD:

Epic period indicates the two great epic periods of India namely the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The study of the Ramayana indicates that the administration was divided into two parts namely: Pur and Janpad i.e. city and village. As per the Mahabharata, over and above the village there were units of 10,20,100,1000. Self-government of a village finds mention in the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata.⁵

BRITISH PERIOD

During the British Period the autonomy of the self-governing institutions at the village level considerably weakened. Mayo's resolution in the year 1870 gave impetus to the local self-governing institutions and bestowed them with higher rights and responsibilities. Later, Lord Rippon followed the footsteps of Mayo and gave the most needed democratic framework to these institutions. Later the Montague Chelmsford reform of 1919 transferred the local self-government to the provinces and due to financial constraint these institutions did not become vibrant democratic institutions.⁶

Later at the time when the Indian Independence movement had reached its peak, Mahatma Gandhi had proposed that Panchayati Raj be the foundation of India's political movement so as that each village be responsible as to its own affairs, the term for the same was Gram Swaraj (Village Self Governance).⁷

The great framers of the Indian Constitution incorporated the Provision of Art. 40 in the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) whereby: "The States shall take steps to organize village

⁴ Jephi Madonna, "Panchayati Raj: Panchayat System in India", retrieved from [https://lawtimesjournal.in/panchayati-raj-panchayat-system-in-india/\(accessed](https://lawtimesjournal.in/panchayati-raj-panchayat-system-in-india/(accessed) on 21st January, 2020).

⁵ "Panchayati Raj Institution", retrieved from <https://www.drishtiiias.com/importantinstitutions/ drishti-specials-important-institutions-national-ninstitutions/panchayati-raj-institution-pri> (accessed on 11th April, 2020).

⁶ Supra note4

⁷ "History of Panchayat raj" retrieved from [https://www.panchayatgyan.gov.in/ web/demo/hidden//asset_publisher/LWFdLdY7l9Hs/content/historyofpanchayatiraj/45322?entry_id=45827&show_back=true\(accessed](https://www.panchayatgyan.gov.in/ web/demo/hidden//asset_publisher/LWFdLdY7l9Hs/content/historyofpanchayatiraj/45322?entry_id=45827&show_back=true(accessed) on 12th April, 2020).

Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them as to function as units of self-government”

The structure of the present day Panchayati Raj body can be attributed to the four important committees formed between the years 1957 to 1986, a bird’s eye view as to the important recommendation of the committees can be:

1. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) recommended establishment of three tier Panchayati Raj System and transference of resources and powers to the body ensured.⁸
2. Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) recommended three tier systems to be replaced by two tier system and Constitutional recognition to be given to the Panchayati Raj institutions.⁹
3. G. V. K. Rao Committee (1985) concluded that the developing process was gradually being taken away from the self-governing institutions and had thus resulted in the institutions becoming “grass without roots” It recommended that Regular and proper elections to be held.¹⁰
4. L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986) was constituted for the purpose of revitalization of the Panchayati Raj Institution. Its important recommendation are i.e., Constitutional Recognition of the Panchayati Raj Institution, ii. Nyaya Panchayat to be established.¹¹

The idea promulgated by this committee finally saw the light of the day in the form of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in the year 1992 and 1993 respectively.

IMPLICATION OF CONSTITUTIONAL INTRODUCTION OF PANCHAYAT RAJ SYSTEM IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AT THE GRASS ROOT LEVEL DEMOCRACY OF INDIA

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1991 added a new chapter namely Part IX which opened a new vista in the realm of Indian politics as far as the participation of women in the decision

⁸ Balwant Rai Mehta, “Team for the Study of Community Projects and National Extension Service”,1957

⁹ Ashok Mehta, “Committee on Panchayat Raj Institution,”(Ministry of Rural Development, 1978)

¹⁰ G.V.K Rao, “ Committee on Administrative Arrangements for Rural Development and Poverty Allevation Programmes”,(1985)

¹¹ L.M.Singhvi, ” Revitalisation of Panchayat Raj Institutions for Democracy and Development”,(1986)

making process at the grass root level democracy is concerned. This step is considered to be a bold step in the way of granting the women folk, the position which they deserve. While Part IX of the Constitution applies to a vast majority of the country, as per Article 243M of the Constitution, some areas are exempted from Part IX. These include the States of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, areas covered under the Sixth Schedule, the hill areas of Manipur and the district level Panchayats in the hill areas of Darjeeling. Various kinds of grassroots local governance structures exist in these areas.

Art. 243D of the Constitution of India provides for minimum one-third reservation of seats out of total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat in favor of women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.

With the help of the following tables the real implication of Panchayat Raj institutions vis-à-vis women empowerment in India may be understood:

Women's Participation in Panchayat Raj institutions in major States (by population) of India (Before 1985 and After 1995)

States	Overall percent in GPs 1985	States Overall percent in GPs 1995
Gujarat	2 women	33.3%
Haryana	1 women	33.1%
Karnataka	1-2 women	37.0%
Madhya Pradesh	2 women	38.0%
Kerala	1 women	38.2%
Punjab	2 women	30.2%
Rajasthan	2 women	32.4%
West Bengal	2 women	35.4%

Uttar Pradesh	0 women	29.6%
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Source: Panchayati Raj Development Report, 1995

Following table depicts the State/ UT wise total elected members along with women representatives in Panchayat Raj institutions

Sl. No	Name of State/UT	Gram Panchayat Elected		Block Panchayat		District Panchayat		Total	
		Total elected	Women elected	Total elected	Women elected	Total elected	Women elected	Total elected	Women elected
1	Andhra Pradesh	143992	71996	11398	569	660	330	156050	78025
2	Arunachal Pradesh	7416	2966	1785	625	182	67	9383	3658
3	Assam	24200	12100	2200	1100	420	210	26820	13410
4	Bihar	114733	51998	11497	5341	1161	548	127391	57887
5	Gujarat	166910	91469	5168	1595	1086	223	144016	93287
6	Chattisgarh	137762	68880	2973	2582	402	562	170285	71988
7	Haryana	66622	28060	2997	1258	416	181	70035	29499
8	Himachal Pradesh	26800	13409	1673	862	250	127	28723	14398
9	Jammu & Kashmir	33847	11169	00	00	00	00	33847	1169

10	Jharkhand	54807	27664	5432	2812	543	281	60782	30757
11	Karnataka	99981	48335	3903	2018	1083	539	104967	50892
12	Kerala	15962	8360	2079	1102	331	169	18372	9630
13	Madhya Pradesh	385339	192669	6790	3395	852	426	392981	196490
14	Maharashtra	234193	118496	3939	1989	1990	1005	240122	121490
15	Manipur	1663	836	00	00	60	32	1731	868
16	Mizoram	3502	828	00	00	00	00	3502	828
17	Odisha	99833	49840	6801	3273	853	438	107487	53551
18	Punjab	94118	31373	2731	910	331	110	97180	32393
19	Rajasthan	117604	66823	6236	3118	1014	586	124854	70527
20	Sikkim	986	493	00	00	110	55	1096	548
21	Tamil Nadu	111857	27310	5056	2426	686	239	117599	39975
22	Tripura	6111	2760	419	192	116	54	6646	3006
23	Telengana	96533	84263	6497	3249	438	219	103468	51735
24	Uttarakhand	60904	34106	3266	1633	436	218	64606	35957
25	Uttar Pradesh	745567	246038	77769	25664	3122	1031	826458	272733
26	West Bengal	49262	24991	9306	4743	834	423	59402	30157
27	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	125	43	00	00	11	4	136	47

28	Daman & Diu	152	82	00	00	20	10	172	92
29	Goa	1415	499	00	00	50	17	1564	516
30	Chandigarh	144	49	15	6	10	3	169	58
31	Lashadweep	85	32	00	00	25	9	110	41
32	A & N island	753	2 62	70	28	35	12	858	302
33	Total	2903277	1292203	180000	75620	17527	8091	3100804	1375914

Source: MoPR Compilation as on 27.03.2018¹²

It can be seen from the above tables that the number of women participating in decision making processes at the grass root level democracy has been growing by and by by virtue of the reservation policy available in the present realm of Panchayat Raj institutions in comparison to the pre- 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1991.

CRITICISM OF PANCHAYAT RAJ SYSTEM IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The inclusion of women in the Panchayat Raj system by making their representation compulsory has definitely been a praiseworthy step. The main challenge however is to detect their actual presence in the decision making process.

- **Women act as a proxy candidate:** In a wide majority of the cases it has been seen that the women members basically act as a mouthpiece of their male family members and only get elected because of the existence of reservation policy. The males are found to spend more time in

¹²Statistical handbook Retrieved, from https://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/20126/0/Statistical+handbook_MoPR+02082019.pdf/4988ca1b-4971-1f3b-54e7-980228eb47f9?t=1564729098415 accessed on dated 12th day of November, 2019

politics than women and they use their female counterparts as and when needed to get political gain. The on-roll participation of women members is much higher than what it actually exists on the ground level.¹³

- **Participation of women in Panchayats due to mandatory provision of reservation system but without consciousness as to the necessity of the same:** Although the government has done on its part to empower women at the grass root level of democracy in rural areas by ensuring one third reservation of women in panchayats through 73rd Amendment of the Constitution in 1992 but this was not done after making the general public and especially the women conscious about the necessity of women to participate in the decision making process. That is why, the women are found to participate in the election only then when their male family members or other male persons interested on them cannot contest election because of reservation. The women keep in their view that their candidature would be temporary in nature and after the expiration of the tenure at hand they would again be required to get back to normal home making works.
- **Socio-Cultural factor:** India is a patriarchal form of society where there is a conventional belief that women are supposed to take care of the indoor and in house activities whereas the male counterparts are supposed to take care of the outdoor activities, and consequently the leadership skills of the females are not allowed to develop and unleash. The political participation of females is further hindered as they are regarded as second category citizens of the family especially in the rural areas.¹⁴
- **Difficulty in the decision making initiative:** The political participation of women at the grass root level democratic set up is not debated but their active participation in the decision making process even after their political participation is not clearly seen. Though the legislature has made their presence in the decision making process but their essence in the decision making process has not been found to be missing.

¹³Nisha Ameen M. & Venthana Vezha, D, “ Political Empowerment and Participation of Women in India”, International Journal of Pure and Applied Mathematics Vol.120 No. 5,2018, pp-4729,4730 accessed on 12 Nov. 2019

¹⁴ Ibid;

- **Lack of capacity building programmes and proper training among women:** Female literacy rate in rural areas in India is of 67 percent among whom only 2.2 percent of females have completed education level of graduation and above.¹⁵ The less literacy rate of rural women causes a serious concern as to their capacity in decision making process. The women members of the Panchayat are not much acquainted with the decision making process and not many steps are being taken to provide them with adequate capacity building programmes, proper training and skills so that they can make effective policy making decisions.

- **No effective outcome of enhanced and improved representation of women in Panchayat Raj System:** In spite of constitutionally guaranteed rights pertaining to reservation of seats for rural women, there are many reports about continued resistance to women's power with incidences of backlash and violence and efforts to unseat them through the mode of no confidence motions (as observed in Sharma 1998; and, Ramesh and Ali 2001). Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar (2002) based on their study on participation of women in the State of Karnataka reveal the fact that although there was enhanced and improved representation in political status of women in local self-government, it had not converted into effective outcomes due to existing gender and other social differences. In this sense, they lack power to implement works as it can be seen that active participation of women was not tolerated by men.¹⁶

FINDING AND CONCLUSION

FINDING:

- > About 48.6% of India's total population is women;
- > India is generally known as a patriarchal form of society;
- > In Vedic period, women used to play an active role in politics;
- > In modern period, it was only 1921 when Indian women were granted equal electorate rights in Madras;

¹⁵ National Sample Survey, 71st Round, January to June of 2014, conducted by the National Sample Survey Office under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

¹⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319297501>, accessed on 30th day of May, 2020.

- > The Constitution of India mandates equality and protects specially women along with other weaker sections of society;
- > It was only 73rd Constitutional Amendment, 1991 which expressly made constitutional provisions in order to make Panchayat Raj institution throughout India a constitutional one with certain limitation;
- > Panchayat Raj institution also existed before 73rd Amendment, 1991 in many forms in many States but the concerned Amendment comprehensively uniformly deals with it throughout all over India;
- > Art. 243D of the Constitution of India mandates reservation of 33% in favor of women;
- > The recent trend shows the considerable increase in participation of women in the Panchayat Raj institutions throughout India, that is to say, the incorporation of Panchayat Raj institution has helped a lot in political participation and empowerment of Women;
- > There are many criticisms of Panchayat Raj institutions in empowering women at the grass root level democracy of India which should be done away with in order to achieve real political empowerment and independence of women in India.

CONCLUSION

Women constitute half of the world's population but their political participation has been extremely negligible nevertheless the presence of the equality provisions and other protective provisions in favor of women in the Constitution of India. The participation of women in the political process is of extreme importance as it would help in tackling the problems faced by women with better efficiency. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment, 1991 has resulted in reservation of seats for women in the Panchayat and consequently this has helped the women take part in the decision making process at the grass root level democracy. The idea of reservation of seats for women in Panchayat should not be in a quantitative basis only but the women should take part in decision making process in its real sense. It is however certain that the increasing participation of women in the Panchayat Raj institution has empowered them politically at the grass root level although in toto it has not been achieved yet.

Thus, the overall and affirmative action brought through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1991 has given women and the marginalized segment of the society a sense of empowerment though they are yet to reach an equilibrium level. As assumed by many researchers and authors, in the upcoming decade or so the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women and other backward classes are bound to make further progress in their social status, leadership role, economic position, educational level, political awareness and attainment but for that necessary capacity building programmes, proper training and general awareness of public, especially of the rural women is condition precedent. Many Indian States have already enhanced the women reservation in Panchayat raj system from one third of the available seats to 50 per cent available seats. The Centre had also a plan to do the same through another Constitutional Amendment so as to make a uniform law throughout India empowering rural women at the grass root level democracy. This is a welcome able step as aptly said by **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar that the progress of a community is measured by the degree of progress which its women have achieved.**