

RESEARCH NOTE

Empowerment of Women Members through Panchayati Raj Institutions

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ABSTRACT

The study entitled “Empowerment of Women Members through Panchayati Raj Institutions” was conducted in Akola Zilha Parishad, Akola and Murtizapur Panchayat Samiti of Akola district of Maharashtra state. For present study, 100 women members were selected from Akola Zilha Parishad, Akola Panchayat Samiti, Murtizapur Panchayat Samiti and eight Gram Panchayat from each Akola and Murtizapur Panchayat Samiti by using random sampling method. Data were collected by personally interviewing with the help of pretested and well structured interview schedule and data were subjected to appropriate statistical analysis. The findings of the present study revealed that only one third of women members decided themselves to contest Panchayat elections. Most of the women representatives had felt apprehensions before becoming panchayat representatives, nearly two third of the women felt that they will have work under dominant people. Majority of the women members had low level of extent of participation in the activities of Panchayati Raj Institutions. Further results of study revealed that women members participated social activity, followed decision making activity, policy making activity, developmental activity, economic activity and political activity. Two thirds of the men representatives agreed that despite election of women through reservation, women will as usual carry on household activities and men will do the panchayat related work as a proxy to their women. However, most of the women did not agree with this. Almost one third of the women also agreed that involvement in panchayat activities will create adjustment problems in home life.

Key words: Empowerment; Women members, Panchayat Raj Institutions;

The Panchayati Raj system was initiated to institutionalize the participation of rural people from all sections in local governance. The architects of panchayati raj envisaged that not only men but also rural women should participate in their development. The Balwant Rai Mehta study team was conscious about the representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). It therefore recommended co-option and nomination of women in Gram Panchayats (GPs) and Panchayat Samitis (P.S.). Accordingly, different States attempted to provide representation to rural women. Some states (like Maharashtra) chose nomination whereas some (like A.P., Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana) adopted co-option. On the other hand some States (like A.P., Karnataka, Bihar) gave up the nomination/co-option and adopted reservation as a mode of providing representation to women in PRIs

(Mishra, 1997). Despite these efforts, because of our male dominated rural society, presence of women in PRIs remained negligible as shown by various studies in different areas (D' Lima, 1983; Manikyamba, 1990; Bhargava and Raphael, 1994; Singh, 1993). Women could not play a significant role in PRIs. Provision of nomination/ co-option of women into PRIs became a patronage of socio-politically dominant rural elites, instead of leading them to meaningful participation. Hence, the representation of women in PRIs remained only on paper.

In view of this background, it becomes important to know how participation of women is surfacing in the present scenario of PRIs. What picture of their empowerment is emerging? Though no comprehensive study has been conducted on this issue in the 'post-New Panchayati Raj Act' period. Keeping this

perspective in view, a study was conducted in Akola and Amravati district of Maharashtra State with the objectives. to study the foundation of women’s participation in panchayats in terms of self-initiation vs. family induced participation and the apprehensions felt, ascertain the level of participation of women panchayat representatives and ascertain people’s opinion about future of women’s empowerment in panchayats.

METHODOLOGY

In this study selected panchayat representatives of (a) the Akola and Amravati Zila Parishads, (b) Four Panchayat Samitis (two each from the two ZPs) and (c) eight Gram Panchayats (two each from the four PSs) were personally interviewed with the help of a specifically designed interview schedule. In addition to this, five common people from each of the selected Gram Panchayats (total 40 people) and 29 government officials concerned with panchayat work in the two districts were also interviewed.

Though the four Panchyat Samitis belong to different Districts, people’s response was similar which may be because of the similarity of the socio-cultural milieu as the two districts are neighbouring. Therefore, the data of both districts, as also of different tiers of panchayats, have been clubbed. Moreover, on the issue of women’s participation in panchayats, a major difference of opinion was between men and women’s responses. Hence the presentations of findings along this divide. Furthermore, to keep the description explanatory yet simple, a deeper analysis of data is avoided and only major trends are presented which will be sufficient to bring home the key points.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Foundation of Women’s Participation in Panchayats Who initiated it i.e. Sources of the Idea to become a panchayat representative: Table 1 reveals that the majority of men became panchayat representatives on their own whereas in case of women representatives, the situation was altogether different. It was their family who pushed women to become panchayat representatives. Only one third of the women decided themselves to contest panchayat elections.

What will happen i.e. Apprehensions felt before becoming panchayat representatives: Unlike the Union or State level legislative bodies, PRIs are closely

linked with the socio-economic and cultural life of rural society. The people representing these bodies have to live and work with those whom they represent. Therefore, it is obvious, on the part of those aspiring to become panchayat representatives, to be apprehensive about their future in panchayats. These psychological feelings are bound to act as a foundation for participation and have a strong bearing on the way persons having them will get into their role in panchayats. Hence, the need to understand them.

Table 1. Sources of the Idea to become Panchayat representatives

Source	Men (N=40)	Women (N=100)
Self	27 (68.00)	38 (38.00)
Family	06 (15.00)	53 (53.00)
People of village/area	07 (17.00)	09 (09.00)

Figures in parentheses indicate percentage.

Table 2. Apprehensions felt before becoming Panchayat members

Apprehensions	Men (N=40)	Women (N=100)
Contesting panchayat election will sever relations with people	22 (55.00)	55 (55.00)
If I could not win the election, my prestige will go down	15 (38.00)	11 (11.00)
Panchyat work will take a lot of my time which will affect my other activities	14 (35.00)	53 (53.00)
I shall not be able to contribute much to panchayat work	11 (28.00)	48 (48.00)
I shall have to work under the pressure of dominant people	07 (18.00)	63 (63.00)
No apprehension	21 (52.50)	20 (20.00)

*Note-*Total of percentage is more than 100 as more than one apprehension could be indicated by a respondents.

Data shown in Table 2 indicate that except for a few (20%), most of the women representatives had felt apprehensions before becoming panchayat members whereas above half of the men did not have any. Women were apprehensive that contesting elections will sever their ties with the people. They also felt that panchayat work will take a lot of their time which will affect their other activities and that they will not be able to contribute much to panchayat work. Nearly two thirds of the women felt that they will have work under dominant people.

Extent of Participation of Women representatives in panchayats: The ultimate test of women's empowerment in panchayats is the way they are able to (and/or are allowed to) conduct themselves in panchayat work. An assessment of this phenomenon is a complex task, yet, to have a reasonably realistic idea of how women are doing in panchayats, all representatives were asked to tell the frequency with which women members express a particular assertive or submissive behaviour in panchayat related work. There may be some bias in the responses of women on this issue which, it is presumed, will be offset by each other. The extent of participation of women PRIs members was studied on six dimensions namely political, social, economic, developmental, decision making and policy making activities of PRIs .

Component wise extent of participation of women members in Panchayati Raj Institutions

Political activities : Data in Table 3. reported that nearly half of the respondents (44.00%) were sometime participate in door to door convincing. 44.00 per cent respondents were most of the time participate in addressing public meeting. 38.00 per cent respondents were rarely participate in distributing pamphlets and posters.

Above one third (38.00%) respondents rarely participate in convancing outside the village and 36.00 per cent respondents most of the time participate in political parties meeting. 31.00 per cent respondents most of the time accompanied by family while coming to a meeting. Only 08.00 per cent respondents sometime accompanied by family while coming to a meeting. Nearly half of the 48.00 per cent women respondents always express their opinion and ideas during meeting .

Social activities : Data in Table 3 stated that more than one fourth of the respondents (29.00%) sometime participate in organizing beneficiaries for construction and supervision of housing project. Only 13.00 per cent respondents never participate in organizing beneficiaries for construction and supervision of housing project. 45.00 per cent respondents participate in maintaining of drinking water facility and 44.00 per cent respondents sometime participate in distribution of fuel and fodder, Nearly half (47.00%) respondents most of the time participate in supervision of village sanitation activities. 42.00 per cent respondents always participate in supervision of formal and non-formal education. More than 54.00 per cent respondents always participate in

supervision of distribution of nutrition for children and women and 48.00 per cent respondents always participate in construction and maintenance of link roads, village roads and bridges.

Economic activities : It is clear from the Table 3 more than half of (55.00%) respondents sometime participate in implementation of rural unemployment scheme. 37.00 per cent respondents were participate in implementation of poverty alleviation scheme while 33.00 per cent respondents were most of the time and sometime participate in implementation of agricultural extension scheme. 44.00 per cent respondents were most of the time participate in implementation of family income scheme and 45.00 per cent of the respondents were most of the time participate in implementation of irrigation scheme,

Developmental activities: Data in Table 3 stated that more than one third of the respondents (37.00%) respondents were rarely participate in promotion of agricultural and horticultural. 31.00 per cent respondents were most of the time participate in promotion of dairy farming, poultry and piggery. 38.00 per cent respondents were always participate in planting of trees on roadside, farm forestry and social forestry. 40.00 per cent respondents most of the time participate in promotion of rural and cottage industry. 43.00 per cent respondents sometime participation in creation of employment and productive assets. Majority (73.00%) of the respondents always participate in leprosy, polio eradication and malaria control. Nearly equal percentage (41.00%) respondents were sometime participate in implementation of women and child activities and most of the time participate in activities of weaker section.

Decision making activities : Data in Table 3 indicated that nearly one third of the respondents (35.00%) were sometime participate in selection of beneficiaries. 42.00 per cent respondents most of the time participate in selection of village artisans and youth of training. 46.00 per cent respondents sometime participate in group formation activities. 44.00 per cent respondents participate in preparation of workers list. 42.00 per cent respondents were most of time participate in deployment of anganwadi worker within a gram panchayat. One third of the respondents most of time participate in preparation of scheme from gram panchayat share. Nearly one third of the respondents participate in identification of families without house site for housing

Table 3. Distribution of respondents according to their extent of participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions

Components and their statements	A(%)	M.T.(%)	S.T(%)	R.(%)	N.(%)
<i>Political Activities</i>					
Door to door canvancing.	15(15.00)	22(22.00)	44(44.00)	09(09.00)	10(10.00)
Addressing public meeting.	01(01.00)	44(44.00)	30(30.00)	25(25.00)	00(00.00)
Distributing Pamphlet and posters.	05(05.00)	20(20.00)	37(37.00)	38(38.00)	00(00.00)
Convincing outside the village.	08(08.00)	28(28.00)	26(26.00)	38(38.00)	00(00.00)
Affiliated political parties meeting.	08(08.00)	36(36.00)	30(30.00)	26(26.00)	00(00.00)
Parties' demonstration.	09(09.00)	30(30.00)	38(38.00)	16(16.00)	07(07.00)
Women accompanied by family while coming to a meeting.	28(28.00)	31(31.00)	08(08.00)	20(20.00)	13(13.00)
Representatives express their opinion and ideas during meeting.	48(48.00)	13(13.00)	28(28.00)	09(09.00)	02(02.00)
<i>Social Activities</i>					
Construction and supervision of housing project.	28(28.00)	16(16.00)	29(29.00)	14(14.00)	13(13.00)
Maintenance of drinking water facility.	28(28.00)	45(45.00)	17(17.00)	08(08.00)	02(02.00)
Distribution of fuel and fodder.	13(13.00)	20(20.00)	44(44.00)	14(14.00)	09(09.00)
Supervision of village sanitation activities.	24(24.00)	47(47.00)	15(15.00)	11(11.00)	03(03.00)
Supervision of formal and non-formal education.	42(42.00)	28(28.00)	17(17.00)	13(13.00)	00(00.00)
Supervision of distribution of nutrition for children and women.	54(54.00)	24(24.00)	18(18.00)	01(01.00)	03(03.00)
Construction and maintenance of link & village roads and bridges.	48(48.00)	26(26.00)	26(26.00)	00(00.00)	00(00.00)
<i>Economic activities</i>					
Implementation of rural unemployment scheme.	10(10.00)	03(03.00)	55(55.00)	26(26.00)	06(06.00)
Implementation of poverty alleviation scheme.	12(12.00)	37(37.00)	32(32.00)	13(13.00)	06(06.00)
Implementation of Agricultural extension scheme.	02(02.00)	33(33.00)	33(33.00)	27(27.00)	05(05.00)
Implementation of family income scheme.	07(07.00)	44(44.00)	37(32.00)	12(12.00)	00(00.00)
Implementation of irrigation scheme.	17(17.00)	45(45.00)	27(27.00)	11(11.00)	00(00.00)
<i>Developmental Activities</i>					
Promotion of agriculture and horticulture.	03(03.00)	32(32.00)	19(19.00)	37(37.00)	09(09.00)
Promotion of dairy farming, poultry and piggery.	18(18.00)	31(31.00)	22(22.00)	29(29.00)	00(00.00)
Planting of trees on roadside, farm forestry and social forestry.	38(38.00)	16(16.00)	32(32.00)	14(14.00)	00(00.00)
Promotion of rural and cottage industry.	11(11.00)	40(40.00)	33(33.00)	10(10.00)	06(06.00)
Creation of employment and productive assets.	09(09.00)	28(28.00)	43(43.00)	20(20.00)	00(00.00)
Leprosy, polio eradication and malaria control.	73(73.00)	20(20.00)	05(05.00)	02(02.00)	00(00.00)
Implementation of women and child welfare activities.	12(12.00)	33(33.00)	41(41.00)	14(14.00)	00(00.00)
Specific activities for weaker section.	20(20.00)	41(41.00)	29(29.00)	10(10.00)	00(00.00)
<i>Decision making activities</i>					
Selection of beneficiaries.	29(29.00)	22(22.00)	35(35.00)	10(10.00)	04(04.00)
Selection of village artisans and youth of training.	06(29.00)	42(42.00)	28(28.00)	24(24.00)	00(00.00)
Group formation activities selection.	01(01.00)	22(22.00)	46(46.00)	31(31.00)	00(00.00)
Preparation of workers list.	01(01.00)	19(19.00)	27(27.00)	44(44.00)	09(09.00)
Deployment of Anganwadi worker within a Gram Panchayat.	21(21.00)	42(42.00)	21(21.00)	11(11.00)	05(05.00)
Preparation of scheme from Gram Panchayat share.	22(22.00)	33(33.00)	22(22.00)	14(14.00)	09(09.00)
Identification of families for housing under rural housing scheme.	26(26.00)	22(22.00)	32(32.00)	16(16.00)	04(04.00)
Distribution of seed fertilizer and pesticides.	16(16.00)	15(15.00)	50(50.00)	19(19.00)	00(00.00)
Mini-kit distribution.	11(11.00)	30(30.00)	32(32.00)	23(23.00)	04(04.00)
Identification of landless families for land distribution.	12(12.00)	50(50.00)	16(16.00)	19(19.00)	03(03.00)
Women representatives take interest in panchayat work.	34(34.00)	29(29.00)	09(09.00)	23(23.00)	05(05.00)
Family of women representatives interfere in panchayat work.	40(40.00)	29(29.00)	21(21.00)	10(10.00)	00(00.00)
<i>Policy Making Activities</i>					
Preparation of annual plans.	14(14.00)	24(24.00)	48(48.00)	14(14.00)	00(00.00)
Preparation of annual budget.	10(10.00)	35(35.00)	29(29.00)	26(26.00)	00(00.00)
Removal of encroachment on public properties.	25(25.00)	38(38.00)	25(25.00)	07(07.00)	05(05.00)
Providing relief in natural calamities.	27(27.00)	20(20.00)	34(34.00)	17(17.00)	02(02.00)
Organizing voluntary labour for community works.	29(29.00)	30(30.00)	32(32.00)	07(07.00)	02(02.00)

Figure in parentheses indicates %; Where, A = Always MT = Most of the time; ST = Sometimes; R = Rarely; N = Never

under rural housing scheme. Half of the respondents were participate in distribution of seed, fertilizer and pesticides. Nearly one third of the respondents some time participate in mini-kit distribution. Half of the respondents most of times were participate in identification of landless families for land distribution. Above one third of the respondents were always participate in panchayat work, while 40.00 per cent respondents family were always interfere in panchayat work,.

Policy making activities : It is clear from the Table 3 nearly half of the respondents (48.00 %) sometime participate in preparation of annual plans. Nearly one third of the respondents most of time participates in preparation of annual budget. Above one third 38.00 per cent of the respondents most of time participates in removal of encroachment on public properties.

Above one third 34.00 per cent of the respondents were some times participate in providing relief in natural calamities. Nearly one third 32.00 per cent of the respondents were sometime participating in organizing voluntary labour and contribution for community works.

Overall level of extent of participation of women members in Panchayati Raj Institutions: The categorization of women PRIs members according to their extent of participation presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of respondents according to their overall level of extent of participation (n=100)

Categories	Index range	No.	%
Low	Upto 33.33	98	98.00
Medium	33.34 to 66.66	02	02.00
High	Above 66.66	00	00.00
Total		100	100.00

The categorization of women members revealed that majority of the respondents (98.00%) had low level of extent of participation followed by 02.00 per cent had medium level of extent of participation. The possible reasons of women members in PRIs is due to the very foundation of women's participation in panchayats is weak. Since most of them have been pushed into panchayats by their family. They are apprehensive about several things including their ability to contribute to panchayat work. Finally women members faced strong socio-psychological problems such as men's negative attitude, lack of self confidence, assertiveness and aspirations in women etc. which is not curbed and will not allow rural women's empowerment to take off.

Thus it could be inferred that majority of the women members had low level of extent of participation in PRIs. The above findings goes with the findings of *Singh et al.(2008)*. Who stated that majority of respondents had low level of extent of participation in PRIs.

Participation of women members on main dimensions: Data in Table 5 shows that the mean indices representing the participation of respondents in different activities of PRIs. Appraisal of data show that the extent of participation varies from 11.25 per cent to 15.71 per cent. Further it is clear that women members participated socially with 15.71 per cent mean index in social activity, followed by decision making activity with 15.00 per cent mean index.

Policy making activity of the respondents rank third with 14.00 per cent mean index, followed by developmental activity with 13.75 per cent mean index. Economic activity with 12.00 per cent mean index and at last political activity with 11.25 mean index. From the Table 5 it is clear that participation of women members were positive and concluded there is little increase in participation.

Table 5. Distribution of respondents according to their participation of women on main dimensions

Main dimension	Index range	Rank
Political activity	11.25	VI
Social activity	15.71	I
Economic activity	12.00	V
Developmental activity	13.75	IV
Decision making activity	15.00	II
Policy making activity	14.00	III

Opinion about future of Women's Empowerment: People's opinions were sought about the turn this emerging picture of women's empowerment in panchayats, is expected to take in the future. Views of different categories of respondents on this issue will not only give their assessment of the future scenario but also reflect upon their attitude towards the issue itself. Two thirds of the men representatives agreed (Table 6) that despite election of women through reservation, because of the stranglehold of traditional attitude about roles of women in rural society, women will as usual carry on household activities and men will do the panchayat related work as a proxy to their women. However, most of the women did not agree with this. They were of the opinion that though due to illiteracy and social backwardness women at present are not playing an active role in

Table 6. Opinion about future of empowerment of women

Opinion	Men (N=40)		Women (N=100)	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Conventional role of the women is so strong in rural society that despite reservation, men will do the panchayat related works as a proxy to their women.	14 (35.00)	26 (65.00)	11 (16.00)	56 (84.00)
Because of their election to panchayat, in addition to the household work, women also have to look after panchayat work which will create adjustment problems in rural home life.	24 (60.00)	16 (40.00)	21 (31.00)	46 (69.00)

panchayats, with the expansion of education opportunities and gradual openings in even rural society, awareness of rural women is increasing. Therefore, with growing experience, in the future women’s dependence on their family will be reduced and they will play a more active role in panchayats.

In addition to the household related work now, women also have to look after the panchayat work. Responses were divided on this issue also. More than half of the men answered in the affirmative whereas the majority of the women did not agree with this. Women said that panchayat work is not a full time job and rural women can also squeeze time for it. However, it is interesting to note here that almost one third of the women also agreed that involvement in panchayat activities will create adjustment problems in home life. Similar findings were reported by *Tyagi and Sinha (2004)*.

CONCLUSION

The very foundation of women’s participation in

panchayats is weak. Since most of them have been pushed into panchayats by their family they are apprehensive about several things including their ability to contribute to panchayat work. Though some women seem to express their views, very few of them appeared to pursue them actively. This is because women seem to lack self-confidence and assertiveness. They are ready to accept men’s views as being superior to theirs. The attitude of men towards women’s participation is one of the most important factors in the empowerment process of women. It was found to be negative in the studied areas. Though the men were eager to show that women are free to express their views, the fact is that they are finding it difficult to accept working with or under women. Therefore, they do not seem to facilitate women’s empowerment in panchayats. It is encouraging to note that the majority of women and government officials were hopeful about the future of women’s participation in panchayats, It augurs well for the empowerment of rural women.

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