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Men and Women in PRI in Rohtak District of Haryana in India: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

The Indian government had provided reservation of 33 percent seats in the local self governing bodies to women by 73rd and 74th Constitution amendment. Later the reservation was raised to 50 percent in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in some states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Orissa, Tripura and Kerala. However Haryana has yet to raise the reservation for women to 50 percent. Women who got elected due to reservation are often seen as puppets in the hands of their husbands and other male family members. For the common perception is that women have a decidedly marginalized and subordinate position in the traditional, conservative, patriarchal and caste ridden Indian society with rigid private female and public male role demarcation. In such a scenario women are seen as misfits in politics. This accusation is never made for men who enter politics due to reservation. The objective of this paper is to find out the actual position. Hence we made a comparative study of men and women elected in upper two tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Rohtak district of Haryana. Thus, all the 107 members of block committee and 14 members of district council were included in the study. The elected men and women representatives' were asked questions pertaining to their background, views on women's issues, politics, local self governing bodies etc to find out the difference or similarities between the views and performances of men and women elected representatives in a state which is known for its misogynistic attitudes.

Keywords: Women; Panchayati Raj Institutions; Rohtak; Haryana; India.

Introduction

The modern age is the age of democracy and successful functioning of democracy presupposes active participation of both men and women in the political process. In India, common men and women entered the political process in early decades of the twentieth century. In 1905 when the British partitioned the province of Bengal, women joined men in protesting this decision by boycotting foreign goods and buying *swadeshi* goods. In 1907 under the Montague-Chelmsford reforms some women obtained the voting right. Radha Bai Subharya,

Renuka Roy, Annu Swaminathan were the earliest women who got into the central legislature [1]. *Rasthriya Stri Sabha* -Bombay 1920, *Mahila Rashtriya Sangh* -Bangal 1928 and *Nari Satyagraha Samiti* - Calcutta 1929 mobilized women for political work [2]. The mass movement led by Mahatma Gandhi drew men and women in to the vortex of the freedom struggle. The participation of men and women in these movements was not limited to the urban - educated - elite men and women but included thousands of ordinary - poor - rural men and women [3]. Some women political leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Deshmukh, Renuka Roy and Hansa Mehta were very articulate and aware and became members

of the Constituent Assembly.

The constitution of free India gave women equal rights to participate in politics such as right to vote and right to get elected. This enabled some Indian women to reach up to the highest position of legislators, ministers, C.M.'s, party chiefs, governors, ambassadors, P.M and President. However, in comparison to men the participation and representation of women in law making and law implementing bodies has been very poor. Their representation has never gone beyond 15 percent in parliament and state assemblies and 15 percent in the ministries. Moreover, women's movement in India has been struggling with their demands for reservation in parliament and state legislatures since many decades. The failure of successive governments in getting the women reservation in parliament and state legislatures bill passed is self-explanatory. This is why April 23, 1993 was called a 'red letter day' for Indian women, when the 73rd Constitutional Amendment gave statutory status to *panchayats* and provided 33 percent reservation of seats to women at every tier of grassroots political institutions.

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI)

Panchayats have been in existence in India from time immemorial. It finds mention in *Manusmriti* as well as in *Arthashastra* of Kautilya in 400 B.C. These *panchayats* were responsible for overall judicial, legislative and revenue work of the area. In the midst of conquest and rise and fall of empires, the village *panchayat* continued to survive and provide continuity [4]. It was with the coming of Mughals that these *panchayats* went through a phase of downfall. The British rule following the Mughal rule further centralized the power. It was during their reign that administrative and legal powers of these institutions were taken away leading to severe unrest among the masses. Probably this and the shock of the mutiny of 1857 led the British to form a Royal Commission on decentralization. The report recommended that the judicial and development functions be again rested in the *panchayats* [5]. The acceptance of Montague-Chelmsford reforms resulted in a stream of legislation relating to village *panchayats* practically all over the country.

Meanwhile, Gandhiji mooted the idea of *Gram Swaraj* with people at the centre. He had hoped that his philosophy of *panchayati raj* could be the framework of the political order of free India. However, Nehru did not see any special virtue in villages. Instead he underlined the advantages of science and technology and appreciated urban

culture. Moreover, Ambedkar roundly condemned the village as sink of localism, den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism. As a result *panchayati raj* could find place only in the Directive Principles of State Policy in the form of Article 40. Later at the initiative of P.M. Jawaharlal Nehru, most of the states adopted the Panchayati Raj Acts in their respective states [6]. Towards the end of first five year plan there were 1,52,237 *panchayats* in the country. But they lacked power in actual terms. The government constituted the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, which suggested a three tier *panchayati raj* system at the village, block and district level. However the *panchayati raj* institutions still did not function properly due to lack of trained personnel and dominance of wealthy and high caste people. The Ashok Mehta Committee of 1978 probed dilapidated economic conditions of these *panchayats* and concluded that government interference must be removed from these institutions. The C.V.K. Rao Committee appointed by the planning commission strongly recommended for the revival of the P.R.I.'s all over the country, highlighting the need to transfer power of the state to democratic bodies at the local level. The L.M. Singhvi Committee recommended that to be effective, the P.R.I.'s should be constitutionally recognized and protected by the inclusion of a new chapter in the constitution. It also suggested a constitutional provision to ensure regular, free and fair elections for the P.R.I.'s. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi made repeated efforts in this direction. However, it was the Narsimha Rao's government which succeeded in getting the 73rd Constitutional Amendment passed in April 1993.

Women and P.R.I's

When *panchayati raj* was introduced in free India very few women contested or got elected. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee had recommended that there should be two women at *panchayat samiti* as co-opted members 'who are interested in work among women and children'. A similar provision was suggested with regard to village *panchayat*. Following this a few states did make provisions for women's representation e.g. the Maharashtra Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act of 1961, provided for nomination of one or two women to each of the three bodies, in case no woman was elected. In many other parts of India too women were recruited by cooption rather than election. However, some states resorted to reservation in the *panchayati raj*. In Andhra Pradesh since 1986, reservation of two to four seats was provided for women in *gram panchayat*, with two women to be co-opted in

panchayat samitis, in addition to elected women members. In Karnataka by the Act of 1985, in the Mandal Praja Parishad, 25 percent of the total number was reserved for women; out of these one seat was reserved for women from scheduled caste/tribes.

Meanwhile, the committee on status of women in its report in 1976 suggested the establishment of statutory all women *panchayats* at the village level, with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programs for women and children as a transitional measure. There were nine all women *panchayats* in Maharashtra in 1993.

The demand for reservation for women in adequate proportion at local self government level was strongly felt due to the fact that women are unequipped because of patriarchy, traditions and conservative social pattern in which women lack education, economic resources, access to information and media and do not have exposure to the outside the world. It was also felt that to make it more meaningful a guarantee is needed for women's emergence as *sarpanch* and *zila pramukh*. In Andhra Pradesh the 1986 Act provided for 9 percent reservation to women for the office of chairperson of *zila praja parishad*. The national perspective plan for women 1988, recommended for 33 percent reservation for women in the three-tier system of P.R.I. It also recommended that 30 percent of the executive positions from village to district level should be reserved for women [6]. However the year 1993 achieved a milestone with the acceptance of 73rd constitutional amendment. The article 243(3) of this Act reads, 'Not less than one third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every *panchayat* shall be reserved for women and seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a *panchayat*'. And the clause (4) of the Act has the following provision: '.....not less than one third of the total number of offices of chairperson in the *panchayats* at each level shall be reserved for women. Provided also that the number of offices reserved under the clause shall be allotted by rotation to different *panchayats* at each level.' This provision enabled more than seven hundred thousand women to participate in PRI's.

Haryana and Rohtak

The state of Haryana was carved out of state of Punjab on November 1, 1966. It has just 1.37 percent of the total geographical area and less than two

percent of India's population. Total area of the state is 44212 sq km. The state has provided electricity, metaled roads and potable drinking water to all its villages. Haryana is among the most prosperous states in India, having one of the highest per-capita income [8]. It has 21 districts. It shares its capital Chandigarh with Punjab. Three fourth population of Haryana lives in villages. The state legislature of Haryana has 90 members. Haryana sends 10 members of parliament to *Lok Sabha* and five to *Rajya Sabha*. From its creation as a State in 1966, till date only 5 women have ever entered the Lok Sabha from Haryana. These were Ms Chandrawati (6th Lok Sabha), Ms. Shelja Kumari (10th and 11th Lok Sabha), Prof Kailasho Devi (12th and 13th, Lok Sabha's) [9] and Shruti Choudhry, and Kumari Selja (15th Lok Sabha) [10]. In the present 16th Lok Sabha all members coming from Haryana are men [11]. In the present *Rajya Sabha* there is only one woman member from Haryana and rest four are men [12]. In the present 13th *Vidhan Sabha* out of 90 members only 13 members are female [13]. Incumbent government is led by BJP's Harbans Lal as Chief minister. BJP has strength of 47, INLD - 19, INC-15, independents -5, Haryana Janhit party- 2, BSP-1 and Shiromani Akali Dal-1 member in the present *Vidhan Sabha*. In the 17 member ministry of Haryana at present there are only two women [14]. In the High Court of Punjab and Haryana presently there are eight women out of a total of 52 judges [15]. The sex ratio as per census 2011 in Haryana is 877 females per 1000 males and sex ratio in 0-6 age group is 830 girls per 1000 boys. As per census 2011 total literacy rate is 76.64 percent but male literacy rate is 85.38 percent and female literacy rate is 66.77 percent in Haryana [16]. Apart from female feticide, abandonment of girl child, neglect of health and education of girls and women, dowry, bigamy, desertion of wives, lack of sanitation, violence at home and outside, *Seedi Pratha* (bonded labour and sexual harassment of women) are also prevalent [17].

District Rohtak with its 146 village and five blocks is having geographical area of 166847 hectares (1668 sq.kms). Rohtak district has 151 Gram Panchayats [18]. It is 78 km from Delhi. As per census 2011 the literacy rate of the district is 80.4 percent. Male literacy rate is 88.4 and women 71.2 percent. The total population of district is 10,58,683. There are 868 women per 1000 men in Rohtak as per 2011 census. The ratio in 0-6 age group is 807 girls for 1000 boys [19].

The sex ratio in Rohtak as well as Haryana is very low despite material and physical development. Female foeticide is endemic and Haryanvi women

are unequal and marginalized yet valorized. There is a strong son preference in Haryana. Every family wants to have sons and hardly anyone wants more than one daughter. This factor holds true regardless of wealth and education. Reports suggest that in Haryana the new entrants to the political scene through the PRI are merely rubber stamps or proxy candidates for their husbands and other men folk. Nor do women fare any better in decision-making in the private sphere as a majority of women have to seek permission for even minor matters such as going to the market or visiting friends and relatives [20].

Case Study

A case study was conducted in June 2011 employing questionnaire, interview and observation methods to examine if reservation of 33 percent seats in local self governing bodies has resulted in empowerment of women and also to find out the level of awareness and political participation of men and women elected at the in upper two tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Rohtak district of Haryana i.e. in *panchayat samiti* (block committee) and *zila parishad* (district council) level. All 107 members of block committee and 14 members of district council were included in the study. Thus the total number of respondents was 121.

The personal profile of the 121 members shows that 46 were women and 75 were men. This shows that women have nearly 38 percent seats i.e. more than the 33 percent seats officially reserved for them. Women and men both were mostly in 20-50 age-group, general category Hindu and married. Women were mostly literate and educated but in comparison men were more educated. Women mostly came from middle class joint families while men belonged to upper or middle class joint families. In comparison men were more educated and wealthy with more income and agricultural land than women. Women joined politics mostly due to reservation and family pressure or encouragement while men joined politics because they wanted to. For women it was their first experience in PRI but some men had previous experience as well. Some women did not wish to get elected again although they agreed that their status in society has increased after getting elected. Most women as well as men were in favour of reservation for women and said that men and women are equal. They were aware of three tiers of the PRI. Most women as well as men were not satisfied with the functioning of PRI. Some men as well as women had difficulty in understanding budget and rules. They wanted government training for the same. All men and women were aware of the problems in their area.

They all wanted more economic aid to the PRI. They were not associated with any social organization. Only few men and women were aware of 73rd constitutional amendment. Men attend more meetings than women and also contribute more in the discussions etc than women. Men raise more issues than women. This is because in patriarchal rural setup young women must observe *purdah*. They must be accompanied by some male family member to the PRI meetings etc. in comparison to men women were less aware of political leaders and only 40 percent women read newspaper whereas all men did.

Thus the study shows that elected women members of zonal committee and districts council of Rohtak district are literate young women occupying five percent more seats than are reserved for them. Women lag behind men in education and wealth and had to observe *purdah* and are also dependent of their male relatives in a traditional patriarchal setup and they have entered political arena for the first time in their lives and contribute less than men in the activities of PRI but their presence in the PRI has uplifted their status in society. Women acknowledged that reservation has led to improvement in women's condition and that it has given them a chance to participate in community program. Their awareness of local problems was at par with men and so was their difficulty relating to budget and rules.

The Problem

The Indian society, especially the rural society has a clear bias against women. Female foeticide, female infanticide, female infant mortality, adverse female sex ratio, low female literacy, low female paid workforce participation rate, child marriages, *purdah*, dowry, wife-battering, bride burning etc. are clear symbols of secondary status of women. Women are subordinated in family which in turn extends their subordination in the wider society, economy and polity for it leaves them without means to get their inequalities and subordination removed and grievances redressed. At times the subordination may be so subtle and ingrained that women are not even aware of it.

Moreover the traditional Indian social norms have clearly marked 'male' and 'female' areas. Women's behavior is restricted by the private-female and public-male dichotomy. The division of labour is such that household chores, child care, care of other family members etc. are considered to be women's work. These unpaid and unrecognized full-time activities leave little available time and energy for outside interests.

Besides, politics is regarded as a male prerogative and as least suitable vocation for women. Women are seen as too soft, emotional, ignorant, unskilled, illiterate, inarticulate and traditional to be successful in politics. If women participate actively in politics, they are seen as depriving men of their chances. Women who are 'allowed' to enter politics by their male relatives are mostly obedient, uniformed, and inarticulate. As a result such women enter politics with a patriarchal whip and behave under the command and guidance of the males as proxies or rubber stamps. Capable women are seen as 'threat' and discouraged from contesting elections by categorizing politics as dirty, corrupt and unsuitable for women. Even those who enter politics are expected to confirm themselves to acting as 'women's representatives' and relate themselves to issues specially oriented to women and children. They are expected to leave other issues at the disposal of men. This results in marginalization of women and restricts their operation and exercise of power. Seasoned politicians like LK Adwani have acknowledged that reservation for women is justified because women face many difficulties in participating in public affairs. He accepts that it is twice as difficult for a woman to play a role in public life as it is for a man [21]. Despite all the above in this case study women were not far behind men in shouldering responsibilities of PRI.

To top it all is the fact that in India 'implementation' is a major problem. In most cases rules and laws exist but they lack in effective implementation. Ineffectiveness combined with corruption results in doom for all the good policies and programs. In our study also women complained that the main problem which they encounter is lack of information and understanding about budget and rules.

The Prospect

Women's effective participation in the Panchayati Raj or the latter's usefulness for women's rights and development will become a reality only if *panchayat* system itself operates in a principled, democratic and meaningful way. Hence, the need of the hour is to strengthen the system and involve greater people's participation. Otherwise one-third representation of women as members or the chairpersons will have little or no relevance. In other words, the relationship between P.R.I. leaders and the local level bureaucrats needs to be relooked at so that the information regarding plans, rules, budget etc. reaches P.R.I. members automatically and smoothly.

Moreover, there is need for reservation to be increased to 50 percent in every state in India and also women to be politically mobilized for contesting elections and even campaigning and questioning the candidates. For women who are already in the P.R.I.'s, literacy and political education programs are needed. Here political education means information about their powers, rights and functions; acquaintance with the rules, plans, procedures and system as well as basic knowledge about – concept and relevance of Panchayati Raj; the nature of Indian democracy and constitution; policies and programs for women and other weaker sections etc. In order to avoid distortions proper curriculum development must be done. Training has to be sustained and periodic. For this resource centers must be created with full-time social activists. Such centres need to provide facilities for information dissemination, discussions, counseling and problem solving. The political action groups, the social works departments, the N.S.S., the women's studies centers in the universities and colleges all over India could be mobilized to play the vital role of catalysts in this regard. N.G.O.'s working in the area can also be utilized provided they have the inclination and correct approach.

The bright side of this picture is that women themselves have a very positive and enlightened view on women's capacities. They are all first timers in PRI and lack experience in dealing with officials and rules etc but they are not far behind men and they also believe that reservation has brought positive changes in the status of women. However, they need guidance and support services. In the absence of institutional guidance and support services they depend upon their families. They need to be made independent economically and through capacity building.

Sensitization of officials and men in general is also very crucial so that they can understand their role as facilitators of empowerment of women and P.R.I.'s.

The task is an enormous one and will take some time to show results. Till training and economic empowerment takes place, a certain compromise on the quality of participation has to be made i.e. low level of participation needs to be tolerated and critics need to become less critical and demanding. Moreover during most of the history men had been controlling PRI as well as other political positions in India and they do not have much positive work to show either.

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