



## Gender quota and female representation

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### Abstract

Indian women have had little representation in institutional politics since independence. There was more concern in the last two decades towards increasing women's participation in political institutions thereby leading to empowerment. Affirmative action has been accepted as a means to political empowerment. Panchayat being the nearest form of government to the people can play instrumental role in their empowerment by ensuring effective participation of them. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment ushered in a major change in the history of Panchayats making provision for the reservation of women. Leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance. This paper has made an attempt to analysis the concept of empowerment and the role of Panchayats in participation as well as empowerment of women and also suggest some effective measures to achieve that goal. The study is based on secondary data collected from different sources like study reports, government reports, books, journals and web based materials.

**Keywords:** politics, gender quota, Indian women

### Introduction

"To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is a man's injustice to woman. If by strength it is meant moral power then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not more self-sacrificing, has she not great powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women."

- Mahatma Gandhi

The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself. The subject of empowerment of women has becoming a burning issue all over the world including India since the last few decades. Inequalities between men and women and discrimination against women have also been age-old issue all over the world. Empowerment focuses on mobilizing the self-help of the poor and needy. If we look back to our society we can observe very few women took active participation in local politics due to the limitations of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Women did not raise their voice in the family and found it difficult to speak with courage in front of their male colleagues. It is mentioned that though women are very much active in their house hold job but they have a negligible involvement in the decision-making process in the local politics on account of their low socio-economic status. Though at present women enjoy equal status with men as per the constitution and legal provisions but still they have a long way to go. It is true and proved that "a country prosper if its women prosper". So women's empowerment is vital towards the development of the society.

### Political Empowerment

Empowerment of women in all spheres and in particular the

political sphere is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the goals of equality, development and peace. Regarding women's candidacy and election to political seats, this is a central feature of political empowerment. In the case of women, the argument is that due to different socialization and life experiences, women are different from men. Thus, "women bring to politics a different set of values, experiences and expertise" and must be present in the political arena.

The Indian democracy which is more than half a century old has entered the next century. But a large mass of women are kept out of political arena still. There can be no true democracy, or no true people's participation in governance and development without equal participation of men and women at different levels of decision making. Participation of women in political life is integral to the advancement of women. The Indian constitution have provided a platform for women in political participation and decision –making at the grassroots level through Panchayati raj system under article 40 of Directive Principle of State Policy.

In order to provide this opportunity, the system of democratic decentralization through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has long been introduced. As the women constitute a very sizeable portion of the total population of India, their participation at grass root politics is so essential to make the democratic governance more successful. The question of their participation arises because of their long standing neglected social status in the male dominated Indian society. Immediately after framing of the Indian Constitution, constitutional safeguards provided the provision of reservation of seats for women in legislative bodies, public offices and public educational institutions for their uplift.

### Gender Quotas and Panchayat Raj Institutions in India

Gender Quotas means reservation of seats for women. It

entails that women must constitute a certain number or percentage of the members of a body. It may be a Parliament, a State Assembly or local governments. Quotas aim at increasing women's representation in legislatures or government funded institutions. They draw legitimacy from women's under representation due to exclusionary practices of the political parties and the political institutions.

The reservations have strengthened the feeling of women empowerment is believed that planning initiatives for achieving the goal of increasing participation of women through the recently introduced Panchayati Raj Institution could be an important measure for empowering women and bringing desirable improvement in their socio-economic and political status. In this regard the policy of reservation 1/3 seats for women in village and block and district level Panchayat was introduced. The provision were also made to strengthen the Panchayati Raj institutions by providing various administrative rights and duties, financial power and the freedom to make, initiatives for generating finances locally from different sources.

With the implementation of gender quotas since the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, the percentage of women in the political activities at the local level have risen from 4-5% to 25-40% in India. It has initiated a positive momentum of changes especially in the lives of women. It has become the best innovation in grassroots democracy giving voice to the voiceless. The entry of women into Panchayat Raj institutions has made qualitative difference to the issue of poverty, inequality and gender injustice. The women who have entered politics represent various backgrounds-rich and poor, dominated and oppressed, educated and illiterate, working and non-working.

### **History of Women reservation in local-self Government**

Panchayat Raj Institutions are the part of local self-governments of India. They are the instruments of participatory democracy and decentralization at grass root level. It is the training ground for future leaders. But Democracy within local self-governing institutions can be achieved in its genuine spirit only when women become partners and participate in the process of decision making. For this purpose Balwant Rai Mehta committee (1958) recommended to establish three tiered Panchayat Raj system and inclusion of two women members in every Panchayat to carry on the specific programs for women and children. In case of two women not getting elected provision should be made to co-opt them. Following the recommendations of the committee, women reservation system got implemented in Panchayat Raj Institutions in many states. But in most cases they were neither aware of their roles, their rights and duties, nor did they know much about the functioning of Panchayat Raj institutions. They had no experience to participate in the proceedings of Panchayat Raj Institutions or taking up specific problems of women and children. Thus their contribution to decision making process has been inconsequential.

The Ashok Mehta Committee (1977) recommended two tier Panchayat Raj system and inclusion of two women members each should be elected to these Mandal Panchayat and Zilla Panchayat. So some states made provision for reservation for women in Panchayat Raj institutions. In 1985, Karnataka

Government has provided 25 percent reservation for women in local bodies. After this, the National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988, proposed 30percent reservation of seats for women from Grama Panchayats to Zilla Panchayats. It was also recommended that 30 percent posts of chair persons of all panchayats should be reserved for women.

Women's movement gained further momentum under the leadership of late Rajiv Gandhi. For the first time, the Government of India setup a separate department for women. He also presented the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill in Parliament in May 1989 providing for a constitutional status of Panchayat Raj Institutions and 33% reservation of seats for women. The bill failed to secure a two-third majority in the parliament. Later Narasimha Rao Government, enacted the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in December 1992 which became effective on 24th April 1993. These Acts gave Panchayat Raj Institutions and urban local bodies a constitutional status and made it obligatory for all the states to establish three-tier system of Panchayat Raj institutions. These Acts provide that not less than one-third of the elected members are women in urban and rural local bodies. The Act also provides for reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population.

The 73rd Constitutional amendment of Indian Constitution is considered a land mark in the history of local government in India. It has the following provisions relating to women (Art.243D):

1. Not less than one-third of the seats should be reserved for women. These seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies of a Panchayat.
2. There should be reservation for women in the seats that have been allotted to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Not less than one third of the SC and ST seats may be reserved for women.
3. Not less than one third of the total number of seats for the office of the chairpersons at each level should be reserved for women. Rotation method should be followed while implementing this process.

### **Gender based reservation and legislative empowerment of women**

The introduction of reservation and quota system in the Panchayat Raj Institutions is a great beginning in the direction of legislative empowerment of women. Today more than 26 lakh representatives stand elected to the three levels of Panchayats. Of these, over 10 lakh are women. The last twenty years of Panchayat Raj, have thus succeeded in empowering marginalized groups who have gained political representation and valuable experiences.

The Women's Reservation Bill in April 2010, which gives 33.3% reservation for women in all levels of Indian politics, took 14 years after its introduction to finally pass by the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of parliament). It is yet to be passed by the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament). The reservation bill will ensure 181 out of the 543 seats at the Parliament level, and 1,370 seats out of the 4,109 seats at the State Assembly level.<sup>44</sup> This is a historic move in the Indian political landscape, as currently women occupy less than 12% of seats in the national Parliament.<sup>45</sup> The Women's Reservation Bill will also significantly change the

demographics of class and caste among women politicians in leadership positions in the Indian political structure. It will create a path for women from lower classes and castes (who are currently confined to local-level governance) to enter state and national level governments. In addition to the existing reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, one third of the SC and ST candidates must be women. Other Backward Class (OBC) members are not included in the reservation due to the wide disagreement about who constitutes OBC and a lack of existing data on the OBC population.

The two main arguments against the bill are that it will only benefit elite women (particularly in national level politics) and that there should be reservations for Dalit, minorities (particularly Muslim women), and OBCs. However, supporters of the bill do not agree with creating quotas within the existing 33% women quota in parliament, as SC and ST quotas already exist. The bill mandates that all political parties reserve one third of their electoral ticket for women, including in the already mandated reservations for SC and STs. This will inadvertently create spaces for lower caste and class women to enter state and national level politics. The passage and implementation of the Women's Bill, and its impact on the existing gender, class, and caste barriers, is yet to be realized, but one thing is clear: India's politics is moving closer to equitable inclusion than ever before.

### Conclusion

This paper has assessed that legally binding gender quota affected the representation of female at Panchayat Raj Institutions. The Panchayat leadership in India is undergoing rapid transformation; the traditionally privileged leadership is being replaced by the new social leadership. The women's entry into the functioning of the Panchayat Raj Institutions at all levels, particularly at decision making levels will usher in an era of equality and prosperity in the villages. The women have a very positive attitude and view of capacity building. They do not regard their womanhood as a hurdle in itself. But they need political education programs. Political education means information about stakeholder powers, rights and responsibilities which energizes them with basic knowledge about the concept and relevance of Panchayat Raj Institutions. It is important to remember that quotas for women do not obviate all barriers for women to be in politics. Difficulties in combining family life, work life and politics still remain a severe obstacle to women in the political field. Further political representation cannot stand alone, but must be complemented with necessary socio-economic changes in society at large.<sup>9</sup> Women have to be empowered with reservation system. The support of political parties is very essential for the success of quota system. Some political parties are not at all in favor of reservation. However, 73 and 74 constitutional amendment provided a space for women to participate in local governments. These amendments put strong pressure on political parties to provide reservation for women at lower level. It is, therefore, first at the party level organization the principle of equality must be put into practice. Traditionally male based political parties need to be encouraged to revise their statutes and accommodate more women into their internal structure and include these

candidates in elections. The affirmative action adopted by the government of India providing for reservation of not less than one-third seats in Panchayat Raj Institutions has facilitated members of rural women folk to participate in the decision making process. Further women are now in a position to access resources and utilize the power vested in them. This is a significant step towards achieving the constitutional goal of equality. However, much more needs to be done to provide conducive environment in the political institutions to enable women to participate effectively in the process of women empowerment. It is not enough to begin the attempt to political space creation in the local and lower levels of governance. The struggle for women reservation at the higher levels of political office must continue. The enactment of 85th Constitutional Amendment Bill is still a dream. The struggle for equality in income, social and political spheres will continue until they are achieved. Only then women can charter their political agenda to turn a Bill into a gender just society. One of the most important positive system of reservation is the growing political socialization of women. We can understand this by comparing the twin situations of pre reservation and post reservation period. In the former case the women had the option to join or not to join politics. But after reservation came in to force, a lot of women are coming to politics because of the pressure exerted over them for the purpose. By compulsorily coming to politics, the representatives are now creating an atmosphere when female mentality is getting socialized politically. Women are gradually learning to articulate their demands, thus enabling them to act upon their visions of a better society and to make a meaningful contribution to national development. But even after the twenty years of reservation facility in Panchayat Raj Institutions, women members have not risen up to expectations. It appears some more years are needed to improve the quality of participation. Political participation of women may increase gradually, stepwise. A concerted effort and state intervention is very much needed to get this vision fulfilled.

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