

Role and Developmental Activities of Women in Panchayati Raj Institution of Kathua District

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ABSTRACT Constitution of India was amended by way of 73rd amendment in 1992, wherein constitution and establishment of Panchayats was made mandatory. It was the resolve of the Parliament to take democracy to the grassroot level, which culminated in the carrying out of this amendment. A period of eighteen years has passed since 73rd amendment and the present study was undertaken with an effort to study the role and development activities of women in Panchayats. The study was conducted in all the blocks of Kathua district of Jammu Division. A total of 23 women respondents from all blocks were randomly selected for the study. The tool used for obtaining information was an Interview Schedule. The findings revealed that majority of the women elected as Panchayat members were married, belonged to joint families and were mostly educated. They were mainly housewives before joining politics. Husbands of majority of the women motivated them and provided full moral support and stood by them throughout elections. Economic independence was the main motive in joining politics as stated by majority of them. The women faced tremendous administrative problems, and had inadequate knowledge about working of panchayats. They could not exercise their right of freedom of expression as their husbands or other male members did not support them. A lot more still needs to be done by the Government in training and empowering the women to exercise their authority at all the three levels of Panchayati Raj institutions, local NGO's and government organizations need to come forward to train women for this role.

INTRODUCTION

India has a long legacy of village panchayats. Historically panchayats have played an important role in decision making process in rural India. The word "Panch" has its origin in the custom of a five member elected body running the day to day affairs locally. With the passage of time and growing population, the administration process became more complex and cumbersome. Village and many of the old age traditions and institutions lost their sheen and splendour. The structure and process of Panchayats are equally pivotal as they bring to bear and entitle role member therein to perform. If the overall scenario of Panchayats was largely despairing, another disquieting aspect is that almost one half of rural population was virtually kept out of Panchayat arena. In the traditional Caste Panchayats, Village Panchayats and in the British Scheme of local governments women remained entirely excluded (Nagendra 2006). Indian constitution, which came into effect in the year 1950 clearly states in one of its articles that the state should endeavor to organize village panchayats and endow them with powers and authority as may be necessary for

them to function as units of local self government. State governments had to decide about the representation in the panchayats. It was in the year 1992 that 73rd amendment was brought in the constitution of panchayat as the means of decentralization of power at grassroot level. It envisaged the emergence of local leadership to solve the problems at local level.

Leadership plays an important role in shaping the socio-economic and political structure of any society. It is through the leaders that the wishes and aspirations of the people are met. It is the utmost responsibility of every leader to work for the welfare of people. Rural leaders are those who are elected to political position in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). Thus, people of both sexes, who are elected as Presidents or members of Panchayats at village, block or district level, are considered as rural leaders. Leadership in content of PRI's has great importance as the objective constituting local governance was to encourage leadership according to developmental needs of rural India. Effective functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions depends mainly on the quality of leadership available at the grass root levels.

Women have been endowed with several responsibilities, concerned with the household and

family circle. However with the drift in development and political policies, the role of decision making is also laid on them. Women, after being marginalized for long are being brought to the fore front through their involvement in decision- making process. Passage of 73rd amendment in Indian constitution allowed this development to take place. Through reservation, women got a statutory way of claiming leadership and a way to solve women's problem in particular and other issues related to society like removal of inequality and women empowerment. It has been observed that women aspire to come out of their traditional roles to create a new environment for the new generation but discharging their roles effectively.

According to Tripathi (2005) Constitution of Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is one of the most important political innovations of independent India. Leadership, in the context of Panchayati Raj institutions has great importance, as the objective constituting local governance, was to encourage leadership according to developmental needs of rural India.

Participation of women in Panchayat has been considered essential for enabling them to participate effectively and independently. Political process helps them to influence decision-making. It has been recognized as a step towards equal society and means of realizing the developmental goals of women. In most Panchayati Raj Legislations enacted by different state governments, women were to be co-opted under special category. Palanithurai (2001), in his study of Tamil Nadu observed that women have come to positions in the local bodies as provisions have been made in the constitution. The outlook of the society towards the women has started changing; Author suggests that women need orientations, sensitizations, capacity building, information and counseling continuously through organizations. The ongoing experiments and experiences suggest that periodical training, orientation and sensitization can help women leaders to perform the assigned role in a better way. He argues that the government will respond to the need of these women leaders only when social organizations and groups support them.

The representation of rural areas in PRIs had been enhanced but the role played by women had been weak. Women have become an extremely pivotal point in the process of change

in rural areas. Enough confidence in decision-making will rightfully gauge community upgradation and ensure women empowerment bringing them in main stream of national development.

The basic need for empowerment is to bring them into the mainstream of national development. International focus has now shifted on these issues as well as on others which are of particular concern to women such as population growth, health and violence against women, access to decision making and sharing of power, women's human rights and contributions in safeguarding the environment. Though the 73rd Amendment Act has been hailed as an important landmark in the constitutional development in creating wider base for participatory democracy and more space for political participation of women, various studies and research works have pointed out that it did not bring positive results to the desired direction.

In Jammu and Kashmir state, in the year 2000, the government had taken initiative to empower rural women at grass root level and elections were conducted in the year 2000 and many women actively participated in it. To understand the effectiveness of their representation and their reason for entering Panchayats, the present study was undertaken to study their role and developmental activities undertaken by them in their respective panchayats. Their roles were studied to understand how effective and how progressive they have become in turn for decision making at the grass root level. This could be judged by knowing their achievements through participation in community developmental activities and their interaction with people, their perceptions of changing roles helped in understanding their personalities.

A pilot study was planned with the following objectives:

1. To collect general information about the women Panchayat leaders.
2. To determine their involvement and contribution regarding developmental activities of their respective areas.
3. To collect information regarding the views of women *Panchs* about social issues.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The pilot study was conducted in all the eight blocks of Kathua district to understand the role

of women elected representatives in the developmental activities of Panchayati raj system (Fig.1). All the blocks from Kathua district and the women representatives were selected purposively for the study.

A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared keeping in view the objectives of the present study. A focused group discussion was also conducted with the community people so as to gather the viewpoints regarding the participation of women in panchayats. The interview schedule comprised of questions regarding the general information of respondents, achievements and developmental activities carried out by women *Panchs*, factors that motivated and hindered their full participation in the process. The data were collected by making several visits and personally by the investigator during the months of March –April 2010.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study was undertaken to explore the role and developmental activities of women in Panchayati Raj institution in Kathua district. The information obtained was analysed and results are discussed under the following categories

1. General Information about *Panchs*
2. Achievements and developmental activities carried out by women *Panchs*
3. Views of women *Panchs* regarding social issues.

General Information about *Panchs*

Women leadership has a pivotal role in the working of Panchayati Raj institution. However, this remains a distant dream. In rural areas,

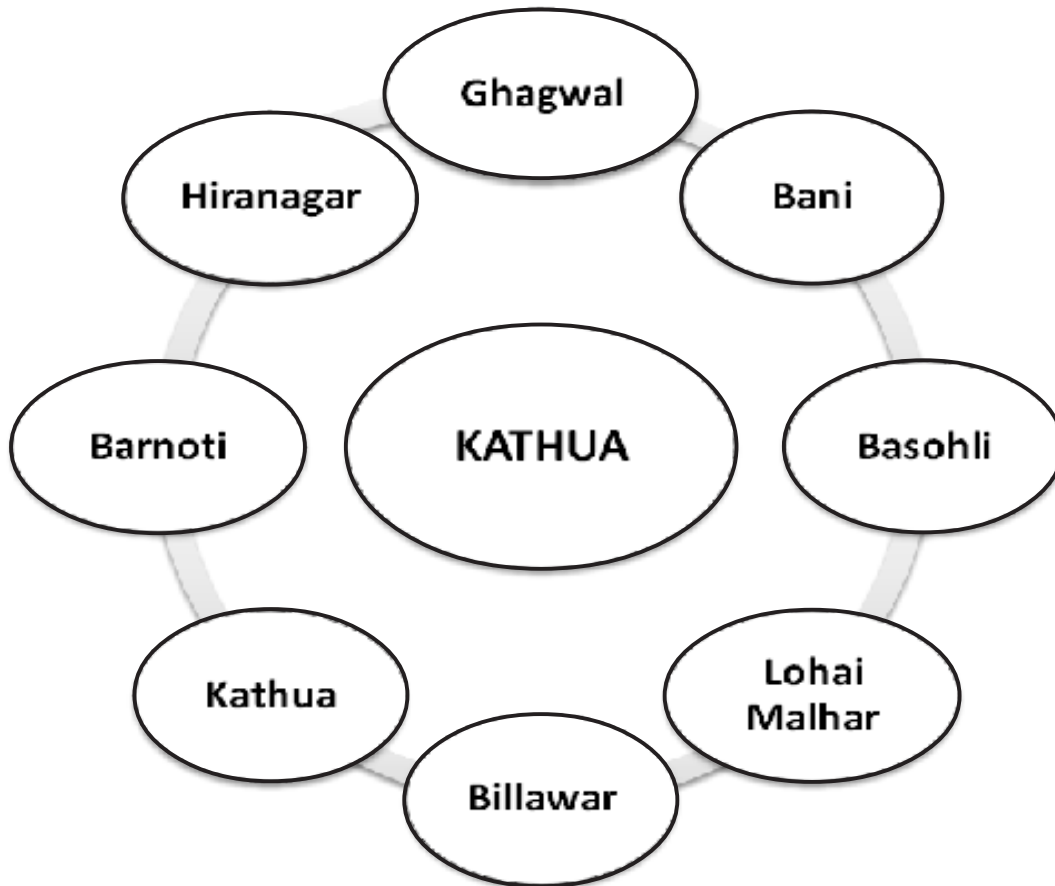


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic representation of different blocks

culture and traditions are observed more rigidly. Family as well as caste plays an important role in directing the course of life of individual. Women have been endowed with several responsibilities concerned with the household and family circle. Thus in our study the majority of female candidates who were elected to be Panchayat members are married, that is, 93.31 per cent and 4.31 per cent were widows and unmarried and the majority (76 %) of these women belonged to joint families where as only 26.1 per cent belonged to the nuclear families.

Educational Qualification of the Respondents

Education is the key that opens the door to life which is essential for good social character. In present society, capacity to understand the issues and problems facing the community and the ability to communicate one's ideas to others are important qualities of a leader. Education is one of the means of acquiring such a capacity. Education for rural women representative has great significance in view of the fact that they have become members of a very important institution. Table 1 depicts that 43.3 per cent of women *Panchs* had received education up to middle class, 17.3 per cent of women were matriculates and equal number were postgraduates, 13 per cent of the women had passed higher secondary, where as only 8.6% were illiterate. Education helps them to understand roles and responsibilities with regard to panchayats. Education develops an insight and helps the functioning of woman as a leader. The confidence level of illiterate women is generally low in comparison to literate women.

Table 1: Educational qualification of women *Panchs* (N=23)

S. No.	Educational qualification	Number	%age
1	Middle	10	43.4
2	Matric	4	17.3
3	Hr. secondary	3	13.0
4	Graduate	-	-
5	Post graduate	4	17.3
6	Illiterate	2	8.6

A study conducted by Indian Institute of Social Science (2000) on Panchayati Raj in Haryana, reviewed the progress of hundred elected women in four districts. The study re-

vealed that majority of the elected women *Panchs* including younger women were illiterate when elected. After two years in office, they demanded literary skill and generally felt the need of education for their daughters.

Political and Social Status before Joining the Panchayat

Man is a social animal. This saying equally refers to women who are an integral part of any ethnicity. Indian women are bound to follow the traditions and customs of a community. Primarily in rural scenario, women were supposed to perform the social and in some cases economic roles and men were likely to perform the economic and political roles. Women were more often kept away from the political frame. Thirty-three per cent reservation in local governance made it essential for the rural women to come into political arena. It is observed that poor response of women in PRIs is due to the conservative thinking of the society and family. From the present study it is evident from Table 2 that majority (82.6%) of the women were house wives, 8.6 per cent were members of political parties and only 4.3 per cent of them were members of cooperative societies and teaching profession equally before joining the Panchayat. As far as participation of their family is concerned, in Panchayati Raj Institutions, it was very less before they formally joined Panchayats.

Table 2: Political and social status before joining the Panchayat (N=23)

S.No.	Options	Numbers	%age
1	Household activities	14	82.6
2	Member of co-operatives	1	4.3
3	Member of political parties	2	8.6
4	Teaching profession	1	4.3

The results of a study conducted by Ambedkar (2006) is in contrast with the present study which highlights that almost 50 per cent of the women Panchayat leaders belonged to one or the other political party before they joined Panchayat. Only few mentioned that they had no particular political affiliation and contested as independent candidate.

Gowda (1998) also showed that the women leaders had links with one or the other political party as such members were persuaded and

motivated by their political mentors who were already in politics.

Ambedkar (2000) showed that larger size of participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institution could take place because of reservation of seats for the women candidates.

Contribution of Family Members in Panchayat Elections

As far as the contribution of the family members in Panchayat elections was concerned, majority (91.3%) of husbands provided them full moral support and motivated them and stood by them throughout elections. As one of the respondents was of the view *“agar hamari family hamen sahyog nahi deti to hum is mukam per kabhi nahin pahunchte”* (if our families did not support us then we wouldn't have reached this platform). They all were of the opinion that their families instilled confidence in them and boosted their moral. Women were also majorly supported by their sons (82.60%) and daughters (43.40%) in the election process (Fig. 2).

Majority of elected women *Panchs* took their own decisions regarding joining Panchayat. Rest of them got motivated by their husbands and neighbors. Some women got influenced and motivated by media as well.

Panda (1996) in her study of village Panchayat in Orissa found that women entered into politics due to mandatory provision of reservations. Most of women were non-political and entered into politics due to persuasion by their family members or pressure from the village

community. The important aspect of the study was that the women who reluctantly entered into politics showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and perception of their role and responsibility.

Reason for Contesting Elections

Majority (12) of the respondents wished to help people in the society and to work for the development of the concerned village. Five respondents mentioned that they were pressurized by family members especially their husbands and fathers-in-law. Three respondents entered Panchayat to hold power and to prove their identity. Political parties motivated three respondents and two members mentioned that since there was no other women member available they thus contested elections (Table 3).

Table 3: Reason for contesting elections

Reason	Frequency
Hold power	3
Help people in society	12
Pressure from family members	5
Pressure from party	3
Non-availability of women representative	2

Panda (1999) study observed that the most of the women entered the Panchayat Raj Institution due to persuasion by their family members and pressure from the village community, pressure from political party and their personal interests.

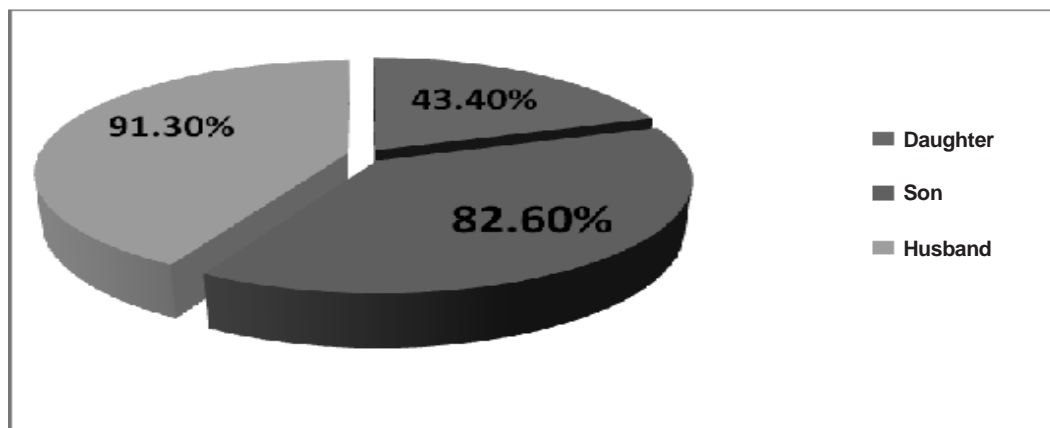


Fig. 2. Contributions of family members in Panchayat election

Freedom of Speech and Expression

Majority (16) of the respondents had complete freedom of expression in the meetings. They were not found meek or mute; they usually raised their point of view in the Panchayat meetings. Seven respondents expressed that they were not free to put forth their view points.

Gender disparity was found to be the major reasons for not entertaining their view points as male members' view points were preferred in male headed Panchayats. Other reason being that they (women respondents) felt hesitant to present their views in front of the male members.

Nanda (2006) revealed that in spite of having a constitution and the 73rd amendment act which reinforces the equity and equality and social justice, women is insignificant and not into decision making in such bodies/organizations.

Palanithuri (1999) in his study revealed that women members are facing lot of problems in Panchayat and male members do not cooperate with elected women ward members. The reservation of women in such organization alone will not help them to make decisions unless they become assertive.

Problems Faced by Women Panchs

Out of the total respondents, ten stated that they faced problems from other Panchs due to their self-motive; Panchayat members were exclusively guided by their personal interest, whereas five respondents faced interference from their male counterparts in all works. An equal number of women representatives thus felt hurt for not having been heard or supported even when they presented befitting and relevant arguments. Two respondents even faced abusive language from the male counterparts when they place their views for the development purpose of the area. One respondent revealed that even the female colleagues did not support her (Table 4).

According to Farza Bari (2005) Though in recent times a large number of strategies and measures have been taken to promote women's political status around the world, yet women in almost all the countries continue to be under represented and marginal in political decision making bodies.

Table 4: Problems faced by women Panchs (N=23)

Problems	Frequency
Abusive language	2
Self-motive of Panch members	10
Interference	5
Lack of support from male members	5
Lack of support from female members	1

Ways to Overcome Constraints

Women Panchs adopted numerous methods to overcome constraints. An average number (9) of respondents reported that they motivated the Panchayat members to inculcate the interest for a positive approach in the overall interests of the area. Eight of the respondents actively participated in the village discussion to know more about the problems. Three respondents reported that they built confidence among themselves to face such situations and dispose of matters, even differences in a positive manner. Two respondents revealed that they regularly attended the meetings to keep themselves updated and an equal number opined that they avoided such situations because it was not at all futile exercise to push the matter any further (Table 5).

Table 5: Ways to overcome constraints (N=23)

To overcome constraints	Frequency
Regularly attended meetings to keep themselves update	2
Participated in discussion at village level	8
Building confidence	3
By motivating Panchayat members	9
Avoid situation	2

Factors that Motivate Women to Take Part in Panchayat

The factors economic independence, commitment to service, transparency in PRIs and administration, support from government officials were responsible for an equal number (9) of respondents to take part in Panchayat. Five each of the respondents opined that family encouragement and communication skills were the motivating factors that encouraged them to take active part in Panchayat (Table 6).

Views of Women Regarding Social Issues

With change in social conditions, Women's views on social issues have changed. They op-

Table 6: Factors that motivate women to take part in Panchayats*

S. No.	Factors	Frequency
1	Economic independence	9
2	Family encouragement	5
3	Commitment to service	9
4	Transparency	9
5	Support	9
6	Communication skills	5

* Multiple responses

posed dowry system, child marriage and *purdah* system. Gender discrimination was equally resented by women as they felt that nation’s population comprises of equal number of men and women. Some issues like family planning, literacy, alcohol, drugs were becoming the major focus in developmental activities.

They were keen to remove the social evils which are existing in our society, but had not yet taken any stern steps towards the removal of this stigma from the society because the women of these villages were totally ignorant and were not aware of the rights conferred upon them by law.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of 33% reservation for women at the grass root level has opened up new horizons for women’s entry to Indian politics. In post- 1993 phase, a large number of women entered in PRIs as elected representatives. However, it has been felt that even after getting 33% reservation, women are still facing lots of obstacles which put impediments on their participation. Though there are no constitutional obstacles for women’s political participation at grass root level or any level of administration, in reality, various structural, functional, attitudinal and environmental constraints still exist which do not provide conducive environment for women’s participation in PRIs.

The present study reveals that apart from 33% reservation for women provided by 73rd Amendment Act, some other factors like education, marital status, family structure, political affiliation of family, party affiliation of members, support of party, have played an important role with regard to women’s participation.

As far as the contribution of the family members in Panchayat elections was concerned, majority of husbands followed by sons and

daughters too provided women representatives full moral support and motivated them and stood by them throughout elections.

Regarding reasons for contesting elections the study revealed that majority of the respondents wished to help people in the society and to work for the development of the concerned village. Few respondents were pressurized by family members especially their husbands and fathers-in-law to contest elections.

It was also found through the study that majority of the respondents had complete freedom of expression in the meetings. They were not found meek or mute; they usually raised their point of view in the Panchayat meetings. However few respondents expressed that they were not free to put forth their view points. Gender disparity was found to be the major reasons for not entertaining their view points as male members’ view points were preferred in male headed Panchayats.

Respondents also stated that they faced problems from other *Panchs* due to their self-motive; Panchayat members were exclusively guided by their personal interest. Women also faced interference from their male counterparts in all works. Women representatives thus felt hurt for not having been heard or supported even when they presented befitting and relevant arguments. Two respondents even faced abusive language from the male counterparts when they place their views for the development purpose of the area.

Women *Panchs* adopted numerous methods to overcome constraints. Women reported that they motivated the Panchayat members to inculcate the interest for a positive approach in the overall interests of the area. Few participated actively in the village discussion to know more about the problems. Some respondents reported that they built confidence among themselves to face such situations and dispose of matters, even differences in a positive manner. Whereas respondents also opined that they avoided such situations because it was not at all futile exercise to push the matter any further.

The factors economic independence, commitment to service, transparency in PRIs and administration, support from government officials were responsible for majority of respondents to take part in Panchayat. Further, family encouragement and communication skills were also the motivating factors that encouraged them to take active part in Panchayat.

These elected women want to make others aware of their rights and are working to remove the evils of the society like dowry system, *purdah* system, illiteracy etc.

It can thus be concluded from the study that influence of family members thus assumes more importance. This leaves an impression that our socio-economic and political structure is such that it leaves little space for the women members to be in domineering presence. It has been found that majority of the women members are prompted by their husbands to contest in election. The study reflects that men still play a proxy role through the female representation in PRIs. This shows that real empowerment of women as desired by 73rd Amendment Act through PRIs is still a far cry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adequate changes to be brought by the governmental authorities in the Panchayat affairs and Panchayati Raj Act.
2. Effective steps should be taken to educate the women about Panchayati Raj Institutions, so that these women do not face any problem
3. Some private agencies like- NGOs should be involved by the government to train these elected women; these agencies can improve their communication skills.
4. They have to provide special training so that these women can perform their duties well without facing any sort of hurdle in their work to make these women representatives more strong. These women should be well trained in all spheres so that their working capacity can be enhanced.
5. Women should be encouraged to speak out their minds. The women should also be encouraged to organize themselves. The

Mahila Mandals in the village can be effectively used as instruments to mobilize them for this purpose. Some successful women's organisations can also act as catalytic agents for encouraging the women's participation in social and political activities.

6. Wherever necessary, advisory committees can be constituted to guide and monitor the progress made in each village.
7. Local electronic and print media should highlight and project the roles being played by women leadership at PRI level.

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