

Democratic decentralization of power has assumed an important dimension after the introduction of the 73rd Amendment Act, which provides one-third reservation for the women. The women, by and large, were traditionally kept out of their participation in power institutions. For the first time, on large scale (33% of positions in LSG's), as a constitutional obligation of the state, attempts have been made to ensure participation of all classes of people including women in grass root decision-making process. In Bihar quota of 33% increased to 50% through Bihar Panchayati Raj Act 2006. Indeed the sustenance of democracy depends largely on the participation of people of all categories. In this context, the reservation of seats to the women, is unprecedented event. It has resulted in the presence of a proportional number of women in PRI's.

The social changes that have taken place in Indian society after independence spite have brought some improvement in the status of Women. But, the position of Women has not improved substantially in terms of their participation in the rural power structure. In fact, the women members have assumed leadership in rural power structure. However, it is limited only to the formal institutions. Their role in decision making in the social life is negligible and mostly performed by husband or relatives as proxy representation. Now they have found place in community power structure due to the reservation of seats in the PRI's and LSG's. Without reservation, it appears, their representation in the formal bodies of the community would be insignificant. The women leader's role as decision-makers is limited to the constitutional establishments in the community. Obviously, the male dominant groups have always had an upper hand in deciding the affairs of community, whether it is political or otherwise. The power structure in villages operated through various

mechanisms of control. Caste, patriarchy and gender are the major mechanisms of control of power that operate simultaneously in the rural power structure. Ritual status, economic position, gender dominance, concept of population and education has their impact on the political setting. People often play their political roles accordingly. Therefore, even democratic decentralization has not substantially brought changes in the political status of Dalits who might find it difficult to actively participate in the local power structure. The reason may be due to their social, economic, cultural and demographic conditions which do not enable them to access to modern democratic forms of political participation. This requires resources like education, knowledge, skills, self-respect, confidence, organizational leadership ability, economic and social status as well as numerical size. These are the major inhibiting factors for women in particular as far as their effective political role playing is concerned.

The democratic decentralization has brought the social tensions leading to caste conflicts to the fore. The warring groups fight for their share in the power structure in rural India. Indian villages are witnessing the caste conflicts as a consequence of the ongoing fight between the traditional elites and the newly emerging leadership. On the one hand, the rural elites strive to maintain status quo by curbing the attempts to effect changes in the hegemonic position by women. Bringing women in particular into politics was an act of positive discrimination. It is needless to say that the political awareness has been created among them. Large number of women assumes political position as members PRI's and LSG's. But a mere representation in these bodies does not necessarily confer the authority on them. Their initiative is necessary. Reservations of seats for women are a means not an end in itself. It requires their initiative to realize their potentialities to be effective in decision-making process. Affirmative action has opened the possibility for women to actively engage in politics.

However, increasing representation in political forums will not automatically lead to their empowerment. Proxy representation by male members is a matter of obstacle. At least in near future, some enlightened women may join politics to redress their grievances. Obstacles to the realization of the PRI's transformative potential are many. Especially women face considerable handicaps in their involvement in decision-making process at grass root level. The factors such as lack of knowledge of PRI's functioning, burden of reproductive and productive roles, lack of self-confidence and opposition of entrenched cultural and religious values affect their participation considerably.

However, the most significant aspect of the deprivations faced by the women is related to their economic position. It is evident that majority of them do not have any economic source or any type of property. This limits their participation considerably. It is also found that the majority of women elected to Grama Panchayat continue to face the challenges of earning their livelihood of their own and dependent on their family or husband. Women in general in rural setup continue their struggle for existence. They work hard to earn their living. The considerable number of women is working as landless agricultural labourers. The housewives engaged in domestic and seasonal occupations find it difficult to involve actively in politics.

Thus, it can be said that in spite of the widely held view of the elevated social status of women in Bihar, in reality, the plight of women is not better than their counterparts in other parts of the country. In order to break the barriers, the women require being vocal and raise their voice to involve in decision-making process to redress their grievances.

Empowerment of women by eradicating poverty, illiteracy, entrenched socio-cultural values and patriarchal ideologies through sensitization and capacity building are some of the vital areas of intervention. Women are more vulnerable to exploitation both within home and at work place, because of the patriarchal social order.

Despite these obstacles, large number of women has assumed the authority as members of the 'local self-governance' i.e., PRI's. Their role, however, is limited in the decision-making process. But still their presence has been felt by all concerned in all institutions in the political system.

### **The Major findings of the study are as stated below**

- 1.** The Panchayat elections have thrown up an interesting pattern of leadership which reveals that most of the elected women are between 30 to 50 years of age. As they belong to the middle-aged group, these women have chosen politics after attending to the family responsibilities of bearing, raising and caring children. Most of them are married and live in joint families.
- 2.** Most of the respondents are illiterate or only schooling is done very few of them have attended higher education. This has considerably affected their participation as other variables like political awareness political mobility and political socialization are influenced by literacy. They are educationally backward. Lack of education has become a major inhibiting factor in their effective participation for discharging their duties as members of Grama Pachayats. Due to lack of literacy, they are unable to understand the basics of the working of the Panchayats. This limits their participation.
- 3.** Most of the women representatives are housewives economically dependent upon their husband or other family members. They also don't have any land of there own and not involved in any other activity.
- 4.** Most of the women representatives have been elected for the first time. Two factors are responsible for this. First the rotation of reservation of seats. Here once the women elected from reserved constituency, she could not contest second time as it becomes general or reserved to some other category.

5. Ordinarily getting elected to the Gram Panchayat is not enough. It is the effectiveness of the participation of women that matters and for this they require initiatives. Awareness of PRI's is a pre-requisite for their effective participation. The study reveals that even after four years of term in their office, they are not aware about their function's roles and responsibilities. Even they do not know much about their role in Gram Panchayats. It is interesting to note that very few are aware of their powers and functions or legal rational authority they get as elected women representative.

6. The role of men in the functioning of Panchayats is a factor which may curtail the political space that has been provided to the women through reservation. In other words, women are not as effective as men in decision making process since they suffer economic backwardness, social inferiority and Political ignorance. The study reveals that women are actually puppet of their husbands and relatives they just act as representative but actual work is done by their husbands or other family members.

7. Most of the women representatives expressed their views that the opportunities may be provided to build the capacity and capability of the elected representatives so that they can play a very meaningful role in Panchayat function. In fact, Panchayat is a primary political institution that helps learn political tricks and political training to sustain the political career. As far as the training of the elected representatives is concerned, the way in which training and workshops conducted to teach basics of the working of the Panchayats is inadequate. There is a need to enhance their communication skills, sensitization of gender, change of their attitudes and knowledge of the functions and responsibilities of PRI's. Since most of the women representatives are not much educated, they need hands on training and exposure to the functioning of Gram Panchayats through participatory method.

8. The women representatives are first timers. They contested the elections with the support of their family as the seat was reserved for women category. Most of them have contested elections due to the support and influence of their husband or family. Women were supported because from their response family male members could not contest election as

the constituency was reserved for women. Ordinarily men dominate the women in the decision-making process which women also accept it as a normal practice and they never protest against that leads to decrease their political power leading to powerlessness.

**9.** It is also quite evident from this study that the women representatives are totally dependent on their husbands. The men are proxy representative of women in Grama Panchayat affairs known as Mukhiya Pati now days they have started calling themselves as Mukhiya Pratinidhi. It has also been observed that not only husbands represent them but also their sons or in -laws in the meetings of the panchayat. During the field work it was noticed that there were several attempts by the relatives of respondents to give the answer to many of our academic queries. Often it was insisted by relatives that the interview be conducted in the presence of them. During elections it has been observed that people in the village usually know and remember name of the husband of the contestant and not the name of the contestant.

**10.** Most of the elected women representatives have reported that family members generally support them in their role playing as elected representatives. At the same time, a number of societal barriers come in the way of their functioning as the male members out play their role, without giving opportunity to the women, and also without informing them as to what he intends to do on her behalf in the Grama Panchayat.

**11.** It is also visible or observed during field work that the distribution of power indicated that the women did not have any major role to play in decision making. She is forced to comply with the decisions taken. The practice of the husband or any other male member of the family being involved in the Panchayat affairs was tolerated and supported in the system. The gender norms and values not only discouraged their participation but also located women outside the realm of politics.

**12.** Majority of the respondents of the study have said that they did not have any political affiliation and. Majority of the respondents (70 Percent) have indicated in negative. It

means majority of the respondents have not involved in public activities prior to their entry into PRI's as members of Gram Panchayats. This indicates that their

**13.** Many of women representative's belongs from those families where there are no members earlier elected to PRI's. It means they do not belong to the family of political background. Majority of the respondents are only first-time entrants into politics, implying lack political background.

**14.** A large number of women elected representatives have indicated that the reservation in politics is a precondition for their entry into politics. Further they have also made it clear that women would not have entered public life, or otherwise politics, without reservations. Reservation is, as they observed, necessary for providing access to politics for the socially excluded groups like Dalit and women.

**15.** Most of the women representatives do not attend Grama Panchayat meetings regularly. Though women members are eager to attend meetings the men in their family, particularly husbands, attempt to represent the women in local governance in a proxy manner. This is so because women are, in the opinion of their husbands, incapable of taking decisions. This has resulted in the political subjugation of women by their husbands. Often husband involves in decision making on behalf of his wife.

**16.** Majority of the women respondents have perceived that Panchayats are not functioning properly. The meetings held and the action plans for developmental projects approved is all done without giving scope to women members for discussion on priorities of local development. The official formalities are all completed to show that the meetings are held as per norms. Grama Sabhas are mandatory but in practice they don't meet regularly. But there is a tendency that the records are created for having conducted Grama Sabhas and approval for the list of beneficiaries of various development schemes and programmes. Ordinary Gram Panchayat meetings held without taking any proper decisions. Often, they end up in factional situations due to petty disputes.

**17.** Further, the role of panchayat in local area development is not satisfactory as the work is not carried out on priority for benefitting the entire village. Hence need based developmental works suffer due to factions within the panchayat establishment.

**18.** Political reservation provided to women have ensured their election to the panchayats is a strongly perceived notion among respondents. Majority of them feel that their status has been enhanced by virtue of their being elected to the Grama Panchayats. Mere representation by virtue of reservation does not automatically confer authority on them. Women, after getting elected, need to have their own initiatives followed for their effective participation in decision making process. That means, reservation alone will not help for their political empowerment. Reservation is a basic step towards their empowerment, but it is only a means not the end in itself.

**19.** The issue of proxy representation in panchayat institutions is a common feature. The women elected to the PRI's have experienced that they are represented by their male counterparts, either husband in-laws or father or brother in case of the unmarried, in a proxy manner in the panchayat affairs. The women, however, educated they are, have left with no option but to comply with the practice. Never have they dared to question it. Sometimes they admit that they don't like this tendency of proxy representation. But unable to express this explicitly. Therefore, they fear expressing their displeasure about being represented in proxy manner in the panchayat affairs as it might lead to family dispute.

women representatives are always at disadvantage as they are illiterate, lack leadership qualities, and remain submissive to their husbands. These factors have helped husbands take over the powers and functions of elected women. The proxy representation is a major challenge in the realization of democratic decentralization of power, and the empowerment of women in Indian society.

**20.** It is noteworthy that the leadership of a women is always confined to her community. The village community generally does not accept the leadership of women, however



effective they are in their leadership qualities and ability to lead the community or mobilization capacity. Their leadership has no social relevance. They may not find a place in the village power hierarchy that decides the social issues. Villagers never take women very seriously because they lack articulation, knowledge and skills. Moreover, the capacity to understand the provisions and powers of PRI's required to discharge their duties and powers in LSG's are quite limited. Further, villagers generally do not expect much from women for the reasons better known to them. Despite all these problems, challenges and shortcomings women representatives in PRI's have made their presence felt by involving in decision making process as effectively as any other group. The impact may vary from area to area. It is needless to say that they have made remarkable presence in the PRI's system.

### Conclusion

The passing of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act in 1992 was a step towards ensuring a provision for empowerment of hitherto socially, culturally and politically excluded groups called women. Political structure of village communities in India witnessed changes which altered the relationship between traditional Patriarchal society and women. For the first time in the history of Indian society, political mobilization among women is increasing. Further, an increasing awareness of rights and privileges has led to their upward social mobility.

Another important suggestion of the passing of the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act led has been the decentralization of power and decision making downwards. Most important implication of this is the reservation was granted to the women in order to democratize and secularize the functioning of the Panchayats and ensure that they do not remain under the control of men.

The introduction of the reservation policy in PRI's the meaning, nature and scope of participation of weaker sections and women has widened. As far as local governance is

concerned, the members of Panchayats were accountable to their own community. The attitude of the elected women representatives has changed considerably within the Panchayats and among the villagers. Prior to the reorganization of PRI's, this has never been happened. It is very difficult to conceive the idea of the presence of women in Panchayats.

The present study found that elected women representatives were not able to articulate group specific interests and exercise their own judgment in decision making. As observed in the field, women quite often do not take part in the deliberations and as a result they do not contribute much to major decisions that determine grass root level governance and development. In some cases, women have also been able to make their presence felt. This is a shift that is yet to take place in the study area. The participation of women in social decision making is a far-reaching phenomenon, because the leadership of women is not yet been accepted by the villagers. Panchayats have also not yet become democratic institutions nor are they arenas of contestation and debate, in true spirits of the constitutional amendments.

Precisely, in our study area, education, economic independence, political consciousness, political background of the family emerges as determining factors that enable women in their attempt to move upward in politics. Education can provide them the self -confidence, knowledge and awareness of the functioning of the Panchayats and the ability to take part in decision making. Economic independence will certainly make them effectively stay in decision making as the constraints are reduced. The reservation alone cannot provide empowerment unless women also have the wealth on source of political sustenance.

In background of the foregoing details it is felt that the realization of democratic decentralization lies in providing women the equal access to education, employment, health care and other basic services. In order to make them more empowered, the capacity building and training have to be intensified. Family as well as the community must support

and create conducive environment for the enhancement of their participation in decision making. It is felt that women need to participate actively in politics. It is imperative for the government and civil society to provide them necessary inputs for their exposure in public life and enable them to take initiatives among themselves to prove worthy of the positions they hold in Grama Pachayats.

### **Suggestions**

The following are the suggestions, provided here under, which could be viewed being useful for taking up certain exercises keeping the women empowerment as a goal, object, process and a determined orientation. They are as under: -

- 1) Women need to be oriented for their better educational and economic attainments which will in turn ensure their participation in all areas of activities including political decision making.
- 2) The women elected to local bodies used to be provided with a thorough orientation and be given adequate political capacity building programmes frequently in order to ensure their effective participation in decision -making in PRI's.
- 3) Political socialization has to be intensified for women as they have to play their role as voters, movers of political activities and elected representatives. The political motivation and value orientation are necessary for them to participate in the electoral processes and developmental activities at grass root level.
- 4) It is also necessary to note that the villagers, particularly, the men have to be sensitized about the constitutional provisions of decentralization of power, reservation for the women and thereby create an atmosphere of cohesiveness among various groups competing for power and avoid the conflicting situations in villages. This is an important step towards ensuring the better living conditions for the women. This action not only ensures the better life for them but also enhances their level of confidence and self- respect. Political

representation requires high esteem of an individual who participate in it and confidence naturally enhances one's ability to participate without fear or apprehensions. Obviously, women require both.

5) It is also suggested that the male members are to be sensitized about the procedures and provisions of the representation of women in the constitutional bodies like PRI's and make them aware of the need for restraints in proxy representation. This needs value orientation among them.

6) The shift from the status of a housewife to a public person as members of Grama Panchayat raises certain issues coping with the attitudinal and behavioural changes. Women need to be properly educated so as to orient these changes towards public service as long as they are in the field and also towards their meaningful participation in the decision-making process.

7) There is a need of providing value orientation, political motivation and political socialization that should occur in the context of family and community.

8) The women must be provided with the congenial atmosphere and environment to voice their issues that concern the community they represent without hesitation and hinge at the Grama Panchayat meetings for which a mechanism needs to be evolved.

9) Women may be taken as the reference group which speaks for the marginalized groups whose experiences are drawn from multi-dimensional exploitative systems emanating from caste, gender and patriarchy. The voice of women is voice of the marginalized groups. Hence there is a need of forming groups among marginalized for interactions on political matters.

10) The government and non -governmental organizations and civil societies working for the gender equality must focus on the issues of gender biases embedded in iniquitous and discriminatory practices in local governance.

**11)** Both male and female members must be oriented towards achieving gender equity which is necessary for the empowerment of women in Indian society.

**12)** Other stake holders of political power at grass roots must give ample space for women to operate power and make their presence felt by the larger society. Hence there is greater need to enhance their knowledge, skills, awareness, education and change of their attitude. At the end, it would be appropriate to say that a large number of women, have gained their entry into the PRI's all over the country which indicates phenomenal shift in women's participation in decision making. The process of transition of women from being housewife to become a public person vested with authority has begun leading her to take many more responsibilities outside the home. Empowerment of woman is on the anvil. The changes in her attitudes, behaviours and outlooks due to her active political participation will go a long way to bring about changes not only in her personality but also in every way in which she relates herself with family, community and society at large.