

**Women Empowerment and Panchayati Raj
Institutions: A study of the operational aspect of
the women representatives in panchayats of
Kanpur Nagar and Dehat since 1993 – 2006**

SUMMARY

“Decentralized structure of the PRIs brings the decision-making closer to the people and therefore yields services that better address local needs”¹. The linking mechanism between administrative effectiveness (administrative development) and people’s participation is the delegation of authority to the people. Decentralization is expected to alter the mode of activities for development. For a country like India, a majority of whose population lives in rural areas it is not enough if decentralization of governance at the local level remains a mere creed, but is an operational imperative. This makes it easier to explain that legislation is also not enough, efficient execution is more important.

The Indian decentralized structure in totality has not turned up the way expected by now. Certainly not a complete failure but Indian system is struggling with numerous shortcomings and deficiencies. It is ‘An Ailing Decentralization’ which could not fulfill the basic objectives behind its existence in all these past post- independence decades. Decentralization was adopted so as to divide powers at two levels i.e. the centre and the state, initially. It was done to ensure efficient administration throughout the country. And, to educate people politically to get the ideals incorporated in the constitution subsist. The discrimination and domination of the minorities, women and

children; mushrooming of mal effects in politics in the name of regionalism and pressure- interest groups are major challenges today. The system is apparently seen striving against several such issues, at structural and more at functional level. This emphasizes the need to relocate the attention towards the sovereign people who are the force behind the system.

India by the large has been a political and socially static society. Throughout the ages the major characteristics of Indian society has been a state of status summation. After independence, the scenario began to change. As pointed out by M V Pyrie (1962) “the Indian constitution created virtually a social and political revolution. The preamble of the constitution is the most precious part”. It declares a solemn pledge to secure to its entire citizen ‘Justice (social, economic and political); Liberty (of thought, expression, belief, faith and work); Equality (of status and opportunity) and to promote among them Fraternity (assuring the dignity of the individual and unity of the nation)’. The process of political modernization was introduced by adopting universal adult franchise, competitive party politics, periodic elections and parliamentary system. A natural consequence followed that there has been tremendous enhancement in the process of political mobilization and political socialization.

Panchayati Raj is one of the most revolutionary political innovations of independent India. It is a channel for political education and participation in the process of governance and development. The first rural local institutions introduced in 1869 were small, quasi-official committees. However, inadequate financial resources and opposition from provincial government obstructed the progress in local government. Notable among them was Lord Ripon, who laid the foundation of modern local government in this country. Starting with the Ripon Resolutions of 1882 a series of legislations were passed in this country, during

the first half of the twentieth century, whose main aim was to substantially democratize the local institutions. By the time India attained independence, the seeds for a fairly modern local government had been sown. Article 40 in the constitution declared that “the states shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them to function as units of self-government.

After independence, India went in for social and economic transformation of its rural populace. Rural development was a definite strategy for the improvement of the living conditions of the rural poor. Community Development Programme (CDP) inaugurated in 1952 was the first decisive step in the direction. The objectives of this programme were to promote self-help and self-reliance among the rural people and to generate and direct a process of integrated social, economic and cultural change. However, the programme failed miserably especially in mobilizing the rural masses to participate in the programme. Balwant Rai Mehta committee was appointed to look into working of Community Development Programme (CDP) also observed that the failure of the CDP was due to conspicuous absence of people's participation. In order to streamline this, the committee suggested that a set of institutional arrangement would have to be created to make the participation meaningful and effective. They recommended the creation of 'three-tier' system of PRIs to organize and manage the rural development activities. Thus, began a new experiment in the sphere of rural development administration to formulate and execute development programmes through the participation of people. In this process, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were the first states to adopt the Panchayati Raj in 1959, followed by Karnataka and Orissa, and the other states followed.

In 1977, the Janta Government at the centre appointed a National Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions. The

committee recommended creation of a two-tier system – Zila Parishad at the district level and Mandal panchayats for a cluster of villages and a free role for political parties in the rural local government. It all suggested for constitutional sanction to the PRIs. The committee however had nothing much to say on the role of women in the PRIs. The landmark event in this regard was the constitution amendment of 1992. The constitution (73rd Amendment) act, 1992, incorporated the following salient provisions concerning the political participation of women in local government, (i) in all the panchayats one –third of the seats will be reserved for women, (ii) one –third of the reserved seats for SCs and STs to be reserved for women, and (iii) one third offices of the chairpersons of panchayats at all levels shall be reserved for women. Rajni Ranjan Jha (1998) pointed out that, “The Amendment aims to remedy the existing constitution and legislative shortcomings regarding the participation of all in the political process at the grassroot level; it has offered an important opportunity to all, including women and Schedule Castes and Tribes to participate and make their impact in the decision making administration”. It is an important step towards the effective empowerment of women. The amendment of the constitution has initiated to create new leadership in the society and is expected to have far reaching effect on social structure, particularly for the realization of gender equality.

The institutional and procedural political mobilization of women through reservation and its impact on the individual and society has brought dynamism to the system altogether. It is therefore seen to be an interesting subject of research and study with either the women or system at its core. However generalizations over a subject can be reliable only if based on empirics that are arrived at through micro studies. Therefore the thesis attempts to study the working units of the politically, most crucial state including its rural and urban variations.

Present research is the study of the concept and realization of Women Empowerment and the PRIs. It attempts to define and bring about specific concept structure of what is generally termed as women empowerment. The study highlights the history of women status that has largely been of domination and marginalization. It suggests that they have been exploited and denied of their basic fundamental human rights irrespective of time and age. Even the democratic structure and the ideals like universal adult franchise, equality, liberty and fraternity could not make any big difference. They have been welcomed when the duties and sacrifices were at demand and sidelined to bear the fruits of independence and success. It was these factors that had led the system towards reserving political space as 'representatives' for the women. Political force behind fulfillment of their will and requirements was felt necessary. The study also explores the political knowledge, experience, opinion, and performance and future aspirations of the new entrants, the women representatives. These determinants shall together bring out the status and working of the system till date and also provide the scope of the future relevance of the provisions.

The thesis has initiated with the hypothesis that the women entrants that have massively increased in numbers through PRIs justify their existence only in terms of quantity. The revolutionary 73rd and 74th amendment act has streamlined the age old marginalized women who are politically apathetic in almost absolute stipulations. The worth and contribution of these women operatives is still a far off objective to be realized.

The study was carried out in Kanpur Nagar and Kanpur Dehat districts of Uttar Pradesh. The universe for the study is as follows:

- Elected women and men representatives in the PRIs.
- Politically active amateur politicians.

- Electorates in general.
- Academicians and Political Experts.
- Elected representatives in different higher levels of governance.

Kanpur nagar and Dehat were chosen for the study because they are the part of the most crucial political state of the nation i.e. Uttar Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh is one of the frontrunner states that implemented the PRS following the 73rd constitutional amendment 1992. It ranks first in Uttar Pradesh population wise and is a very important industrial and commercial city. Kanpur has also been observed as a very sensitive seat in Lok Sabha. Women of the state work hard who even engage in backbreaking agricultural activities. In a social set up where there is active partnership of women in economic activities but passive role in social configuration, studying the situation where they have been legally assigned the job of decision- making, makes it a fertile area for research.

Further, the state has an unbalanced sex ratio and low female literacy. The origins of the discrimination can be traced to the patriarchal culture that prefers to see the women behind the veil even as they work in houses or fields. Historically, U.P. women have not been allowed to enter the panchayats, which was considered a male domain, and decision on women issues were taken by men and were binding. Thus, women were completely secluded from political decision- making process and are trained from the very childhood that politics is man's concern. With such a background, it becomes interesting to study the nature of women's participation in the so- called men's forte where they have entered with official support.

The units for the interview schedule were chosen randomly but there has been a careful attempt to get the opinion of people with almost all party affiliation or inclination. The attempt has also been to include the people from all class, caste and religious diversities. The efforts were taken to attain the maximum representative and reliable data for the highest possible efficient analysis.

The study is framed within seven chapter distributions. First chapter briefs out the constitutional frame work of the country at large, which is the backdrop over which the administration rests. It briefly introduces the concept and relevance of the decentralized structure and that of PRIs. The chapter also shortly explains the concept of women empowerment and its imperatives with respect to women's reserved participation in the PRIs.

Second chapter deals with the study of the existence and operation of the panchayati raj institutions in the country since the ancient period to the post- independence era till the execution of the 73rd and 74th constitution amendment act. The chapter brings out the status of local government or the local administration during different periods of political history. It simultaneously explores the status and participation of women in each period. The chapter also includes the study of the post-independence evolutionary reformation of the PRIs through different committees and their respective recommendations.

Chapter Three, comprises of the study and discussion over the structural and functional provisions of the PRIs as per the 73rd and 74th constitution amendment act. It is a thorough study of the institutionally changed status, powers and functions of the women in the PRIs. The chapter also studies the role and contribution of the NGOs and CBOs in individual capacity and with that of the PRIs. Policies and provisions like NREGA is also included which

are expected to have their bearing over the work and approach of the people and system both.

Fourth chapter in the thesis concentrates over the functional observation of the women representatives within the system. It takes into account the legal initiatives towards women welfare, assistance and upliftment apart from those restricted to the functioning of the PRIs. It also examines the cultural obstacles that hinder the realization of the institutional intentions and individual women aspirations. The chapter highlights numerous success and struggle stories of these new political entrants from different parts of the country. These stories explore the scope and potential of women representatives and provide encouragement and relevance to the provisions. They are also the source of learning as they bring out the factors and environment that are required for women to utilize their opportunity as streamline workers. At the same time the struggle stories bring out the challenges existing in our society which are not only political and institutional but social or individual in nature. It therefore presents us the task of exploring the off ways and find redress to the issues.

Fifth chapter explains the concept of empowerment, its difference with that of the concept of 'power' as in traditional approach. It further explains the concept of women empowerment and its political relativity. The chapter also underlines the women plight and domination as a global phenomenon or practice and gender inequality that exists and tortures them from cradle to grave in numerous ways. It thus brings out the necessity of working and realization of the women empowerment as a process not just a political buzz. The chapter also includes the study of measures to arrive at the target. The discussion over the imperatives of women status, their empowerment and PRIs as empowering units also find place in the chapter.

Chapter six deals with the universe of the study i.e. the districts of Kanpur Nagar and Dehat. The chapter comprises of the description of the objectives, framework, research design, scope, universe, sampling unit, and interview schedule etc. of the study. It further makes out the analysis and generalizations brought out from the data and information from institutional or government sources and that gained from the interview schedule.

Last i.e. the seventh chapter consists of the conclusions, derivations of the study and the limitations faced from the administrative, political party, NGOs and people's approach. It also consists of the recommendations suggested for the realization of women empowerment specifically through their participation in the PRIs. It also suggests few institutional changes or amendments for the PRIs for their efficient working. It lastly suggests few related interesting topics or areas for further study and research.

Conclusively the thesis can be summed up through following generalizations. Reservation in the PRIs or other political institutions seems to hold its relevance and worth. They are significant and can be further expected to encourage women for increased and substantial political participation and involvement. Although not even an average performer presently but, with time and experience they can definitely be expected to get equipped with the political ways to voice their issues and address them adequately.

This legislation has brought about the political dynamics of the female voters and participants. It has enhanced their status and rights. In many states there is greater awareness about gender equality and women's rights due to active women's organizations. Human rights initiatives have also been taken here to protect the interest of women in society.

Women's political empowerment in the last nine years through the constitution amendment has exploded several myths, like the belief that they are passive and disinterested in political institution; only the well to do upper strata women will come through reservation; only the kin of powerful politicians will enter panchayats through political connectivity to keep the seats for them; and most importantly, women are only proxy-'name sake' members and they do not participate in the panchayat. A new class of 'sarpanch patis' also emerged where the husband of a woman sarpanch managed the affairs of the panchayat, while woman acted only as a 'Rubber Stamp'.

It has also been proved that there is greater efficiency and transparency in the public affairs specifically in the posts held by the women. The state government and civil society organizations are today recognizing outstanding women leaders in the panchayat by instituting yearly awards. Although there are serious setbacks even today from the male dominated patriarchal society. Elected women have often become the victim of exploitation, violence and harassment. However the spirits of struggle and victory are high enough in women to overcome such big and small setbacks to not just prove their worth in the system but also to have their rights granted.

The concept of empowerment has, of late, replaced that of development, since women, even after fifty years of political equality and rights, property laws and social development policies and programmes, have not been able to exercise them in an equal and adequate measure. The status of women, thereby, continues to be low if not declining further and women continue to be second class citizens in their own country. It has become a conviction with women's studies activists and scholars that an enhancement in the status of women, their social-economic advancement and their access to rights, equality and justice would not be possible unless

they begin playing a more active and effective role in the public, political sphere particularly at the higher, decision making leadership positions. It is further believed that such an empowerment of women would not merely bring about a qualitative change in their own lives, but will also feminize politics and functioning of public institutions. The presence of appreciable women, in a visible form, at effective and meaningful labels, will help in heralding a humane and equitable social order.