

Chapter 6

Conclusions

Women's political participation is one of the key indicators of gender equality. It provides them increased access in decision making forums, enhances their skills and competencies and in turn empowers them. However, it is often argued that 'women comprise majority of the electorates, but few of the elected leaders'. Political participation of women has been restricted due to various deep-rooted socio-cultural, political and psychological barriers. In this regard, various legislative measures, development strategies and gender specific initiatives have been adopted by the government and other organizations to address the gender imbalance and political exclusion of women.

The concept of democratic decentralization based on Mahatma Gandhi's vision of *Village Swaraj* or rural self-governance saw its fruition in the Panchayat Raj Act which came into existence vide 73rd & 74th Constitution Amendments (1992). The Act was of historical significance as it marked a new era with regard to political participation of women in the country. Apart from providing reservation of seats for women, it provided them an opportunity to be involved in decision-making, power-sharing and in turn empowering them. The Act had a potential to enable almost a million women to occupy positions of leadership at grass root level and provided a structural framework for women's participation in the political sphere.

Communication and development share a natural synergy and the role of communication is imperative in empowering women. Communication creates awareness among women to achieve their potential as prime movers of change, helps them to share their experiences, problems and concerns and focuses attention on gender issues through participation in decision-making processes. Various studies have revealed that for any development programme to be successful, it has to be synchronized and integrated with the development needs of the society. Without relevant and effective communication strategies, socio-economic and political development is likely to get impaired. In this context, it was considered worthwhile to examine the role of communication in participation and empowerment of women PRFs in the political process and

decision-making at the grass root level. The PR election was held in Jammu and Kashmir in 2011 after a gap of almost three decades and the system was almost defunct. An overwhelming percentage of the rural population (80 percent) participated in the election wherein 33 percent of seats were reserved for women and scores of women joined the political sphere at the local level.

To explore the participation of women in Panchayati Raj, a study was conducted in Pattan and Kunzer blocks of Baramulla district in Jammu and Kashmir. The objectives of the study were to analyze their awareness and perceptions about panchayats, and assess their preparedness for new role in public life. The support systems available to women PRFs in terms of family, community, State and mass media were examined and the efficacy of various communication channels available to them in discharging their roles and responsibilities as people's representatives was also explored.

For the study, both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were used to generate data on the subject. The quantitative data was collected from 69 women PRFs in two blocks (Pattan and Kunzer) of Baramulla district through Survey method using structured interview schedules. The analysis of the survey findings of PRFs provided a broad understanding of the issues, opportunities and challenges within the PR system in the state. It helped to understand a wider perspective of the women PRFs in the study area and revealed various personal, socio-cultural and political factors that motivated women to contest the 2011 PR election and the challenges faced by them in discharging their duties.

The PR system, like other socio-political systems, cannot be analyzed only by quantitative analysis, hence qualitative data was collected through indepth interviews to obtain deeper insights into the subject. Towards this, stakeholders from different layers of PR system were involved which included women sarpanchs, state administration representatives such as district, block and village level officials and media professionals. Following the 'constant comparative method', the emergent responses from the field survey were categorized into several themes pertinent to the topic under study then these themes were expanded and their relationships to one another explored and integrated into a coherent discussion to draw findings. Some common areas were examined for all the three categories of stakeholders to focus on the functioning of PR system. While some specific areas for exploration were also identified to obtain their feedback

for a holistic understanding of the issues under study. The findings were derived from the analysis of data emanating from the field study and indepth interviews.

It was found that women from different age groups and marital status participated in 2011 PR election, but majority of them were married and in the age-group of 30-50 years. Mostly women PRFs were illiterates, engaged in agriculture and handicraft sectors. They earned less than Rs. 2000/ per month and were mostly Muslims belonging to General category. Interestingly, the age of women PRFs had linkage with the level of education as the younger generation of women PRFs was comparatively better educated than those belonging to the older generation.

Women PRFs mostly mentioned progress and development of their respective wards as the main reason for contesting the election and largely perceived their role as ‘social servants’ and some as ‘people’s representatives’. They were paid a meager amount as monthly honourarium, which too was not paid on a regular basis and according to them this led to corruption in the PR system. There is need to enhance the honorarium of PRFs in view of the rising cost of living and the circumstances under which they had to work. Though community emerged as the highest support system available to women PRFs in contesting the election closely followed by family; husbands emerged as the main decision makers for participation in election for women. This trend was visible across varied educational levels reinforcing the prevalence of patriarchal structure of society.

Patriarchy and Proxy Culture

The thirty-three percent reservation for women in 2011 PR election provided them an opportunity to contest the election and emerge as people’s representatives at the grass root level. Some of them made sincere efforts to create space for themselves in the political spectrum that had remained a male domain so far. They were articulate and worked hard for the development of their ward in terms of construction of toilets, road development, distribution of welfare schemes among needy and deserving people such as IAY, AAY, old age pension, etc. They also contributed in the implementation of other rural development programmes such as MGNREGA etc. in their respective areas.

It was found that women were largely made to contest the election by the male members of their family especially husbands because the reserved quota had to be filled-up and they themselves could not contest from that specific ward. Some male family members admitted that they would not have allowed their women folk to contest had there been no reserved quota for them. In most cases, these male members worked on behalf of the women PRF in their wards - they accompanied women PRFs to various offices for PR related works and attended meetings at Halqa Panchayat level. Some of them even prepared development plans and budget for the ward and held interactions with sarpanch, VLW, block/district officials, among others. Some of them also used the PR system for their personal benefit by appropriating contracts and PR related schemes in their favour. Many a time, the women PRFs were not even consulted while decisions were taken at the Halqa Panchayat level or their views were ignored. At times, they were pressurized by their family members to approve the decisions taken by male-dominated panchayats.

Thus, reservation emerged as the main driving force for bringing women in the political fold at the grass root level and provided them an opportunity to participate in PR system. However, due to generations of subjugation meted out to women, most of the PRFs could not function as effective representatives of their wards. They had little or no control over their rightful political space and were largely used as proxy to their male family members. The overall patriarchal social structure represented by the male family members, male PRFs as well as sarpanchs dominated the political landscape at the local level revealing the prevalent gender imbalances and discrimination in society.

Devolution of Powers

The goal of political empowerment of women did not end with their induction into the power structures but actually started from there. The state government in its endeavor to strengthen functioning of local governance in Jammu and Kashmir and to empower PRFs in the state claimed to delegate powers to PRIs with regard to the funds and functions of 14 departments. The PRFs however, denied any 'real' power been delegated to them. The absence of proper devolution of powers to panchayats came to fore even during indepth interviews wherein it was

evident across all interviews that PRIs were not playing their intended role partly due to the ambiguity regarding role and responsibilities of PRFs. While district and block officials argued that PRIs assumed significant powers for overall development of the area, VLWs felt real powers had not been transferred to PRFs as none of the 14 departments, whose powers were supposedly delegated to PRFs, cooperated with them. Even the Sarpanchs denied the delegation of powers to PRIs. Thus, a strong need to explicitly outline these expectations was felt with clear cut demarcation of roles and responsibilities of PRFs relating to projects, plans and departments of government.

Capacity Building

The patriarchal influences got amplified due to the poverty, illiteracy, lack of awareness of PR system among women PRFs and their forced participation in PRIs. Their ignorance and inexperience to hold public office hampered their work and they were unable to channelize the advantages of PR system for the development of their communities.

Several training programmes and awareness camps were initially organized by the government to educate women PRFs about their roles, responsibilities and functions, but their level of awareness remained abysmally low. Further, no training programme was conducted during 2015 and 2016 when the political situation was relatively stable in the state. In view of their lack of understanding of the PR system, a strong need for planning, designing and implementing focused training programmes was traced during the field survey as well as in indepth interviews.

Structured training programmes drawing upon local content and supplemented with practical field demonstrations on core requirements of PR system would help to strengthen the local governance in the state. Some such training programmes can be designed in the format of interactive sessions, using problem solving and simulated role playing techniques to upgrade their skills and competencies. Public awareness campaigns may be mounted to address the stereotypical representation of women emphasizing the positive role that women can play in decision-making processes at all levels of governance. These capacity building programmes should be made an ongoing activity also involving male PRFs to expose them to the issues related to gender discrimination and stressing the need for involving women at every level of

public life. These programmes may be conducted by experienced trainers in face-to-face situations as well as using technology. Video conferencing sessions can be organized involving NGO representatives, media practitioners, government officials, village heads and researchers located in other parts of the state/country for training purposes as well as for building linkages. This, however, would require adequate infrastructure facilities at the grass root level.

Women PRFs were found operating on individual levels without proper linkages with other PRFs and institutions of PR system. Since most of them were new to the system and placed in relative isolation, they need to form linkages among themselves as well as with other stakeholders. The networking would provide them a forum for interaction, information sharing and facilitate better coordination and cooperation. Such collaborative thinking and brainstorming is likely to expose the PRFs to the issues and problems faced by others and suggest measures how to address them for achieving the desired objectives of local self-governance.

Political Affiliations

Political parties used PR system as a platform to strengthen and consolidate their position in electoral politics. These political parties were found involved in the selection and election of the women candidates right from the beginning. The political affiliations of some women PRFs with both regional and national political parties such as National Conference, People Democratic Party (PDP), Democratic Party Nationalist (DPN) and Congress came to the fore during the field study as well as indepth interviews. The influence of these political parties on some women PRFs was evident in various ways which defeated the basic apolitical nature and objectives of Panchayati Raj. They fell prey to the agenda of the political parties as the schemes which should have been normally accessible to people as a part of the panchayat package were made available through such political affiliations. This led to the perception of PR system as an extension of existing political equations between the ruling and opposition political parties. At times, this led to political rivalry in the form of non-cooperation among sarpanchs and panchs within the respective Halqa Panchayats thus affecting the development work in the area.

Above analysis emphasized a strong need to re-position PRIs as apolitical system so that PRFs can function independently free from political pressures and interferences. The access to development programmes and policies facilitated through PR system must be ensured through transparent and objective criteria to make them available to all and not allowed to be hijacked by a section of political parties. Further, the PR system needs to be seen as community driven and people-friendly programmes which are implemented by the community for the community. The reforms need to integrate PRIs with existing community-based welfare oriented programmes to harness the PR system as a mechanism for strengthening localized initiatives for the development of community.

Threat perception

Threat perception emerged as one of the major challenges for PRFs as it did not allow them to work in a peaceful environment. Five sarpanchs and one panch were killed by unidentified gunmen in Baramulla district during 2011-2016 and the killings generated a great deal of fear among the people and led to the resignations of some PRFs, which however, were not accepted by the government. Some women PRFs switched off their mobile phones or changed their mobile numbers, some even fled to safer places apprehending that they too might get killed. However, a small section did not succumb to such threats and continued to do their work. The prevalent atmosphere of threat may overshadow the enthusiasm of women PRFs, and prevent them from coming forward to contest PR elections in future. This further stressed the need for strengthening the apolitical nature of PR system to safeguard it from threats emanating from political and non-political players.

The Role of Communication

Women PRFs utilized various forms of communication for their personal and professional responsibilities. This included interpersonal communication with local people, sarpanchs, VLWs, BDOs and district officials; and group interactions during meetings and training programmes at

the village, block and district levels. Such interactions helped them to clarify issues, articulate their concerns and receive direct and immediate feedback. They also used different forms of mass media including Television, Radio and mobile phones.

The access and outreach of above media was reasonably high in the study area which can be attributed to the increase in literacy rates, advancements in technology and greater outreach and penetration of media. Among various forms of mass media utilized by women PRFs, emphasis was found on television viewing followed by radio listening for information and entertainment. Some women PRFs said they did not get enough time to watch television or listen to radio due to their hectic schedule, but majority of them watched/listened the local news bulletin of 10-20 minutes duration on DD Kashir and Radio Kashmir, Srinagar. Some PRFs also remembered the timing of local news bulletin broadcast on DD Kashir (07:00 PM) and Radio Kashmir Srinagar (7:30 PM). The entertainment programmes such as Kashmiri songs and dramas were enjoyed by some PRFs on their television sets while some used Radio due to frequent power cuts in their area.

Television and radio have ample scope for disseminating PR related information and developing capacity building of PRFs to strengthen their networking with various stakeholders. However, despite high media access and reach, these were not found sufficiently utilized as PR related issues did not find adequate space in media. The media projection was largely confined to event/situation reporting leaving out the vast scope for relevant PR related issues. It was argued during the interviews that media being obsessed with political situation in the Valley, treated PR related issues as insignificant and did not accord them adequate space or time.

The access to newspapers among women PRFs in the study area was significant, but only a miniscule section of them read newspapers. In an interesting trend, women PRFs were found exposed to newspapers even if they themselves did not read and newspapers were 'read out' to them by their family members. A small section of women PRFs read the newspapers themselves and majority of them had no exposure to newspapers at all. The newspapers read or 'read out' mostly included Urdu local newspapers such as Srinagar Times, Alsafa, Aftaab and Kashmir

Uzma and English local newspaper, Greater Kashmir. The low literacy levels prevented newspapers from being adequately utilized by women PRFs.

Cent per cent access to mobile phones was traced in the study area which was in tune with its increased access at the national level. The widespread accessibility of mobile phones may be attributed to the popularity, easy access and utility of the fast growing technology enabling people to stay connected with their family, relatives and friends and to stay updated about PRI activities. Most of the women PRFs had their own mobile phones, while some used their husband's or other family members' mobile phones to stay connected. The education and occupation of women PRFs had no implications on their access to mobile phones.

The illiterate women PRFs had devised a method of using mobile phones with the help of different symbols as they used some identification marks for calling certain mobile numbers frequently required by them. Some women PRFs were helped by their respective family members to make a call while a small section was in the process of learning. Mobile phones were also used by the block and district level authorities to reach out to women PRFs for conveying the date, time and venue etc. of training programmes telephonically (voice call). Some women PRFs also contacted VLWs, sarpanchs, other PRFs and Junior Engineers using their mobile phones (voice call) regarding PR related issues.

The access and utilization of the Internet among women PRFs was found to be negligible though most of them were found familiar with the word 'Internet' as they had seen the younger generation using it.

There was ample scope for using Small Media such as pamphlets, wall graffiti, banners etc. for PRI activities in the study area which however, remained under-utilized. Small Media could be optimally utilized at the Halqa Panchayat level for awareness generation among women PRFs and exposing them to various functions of panchayats, it could also be constructively explored for strengthening the PR functioning in the state keeping in view its easy access, local appeal, flexibility and cost-effectiveness.

From the analysis, greater possibility of using different forms of communications at multiple levels for bridging the information gap was traced. The effective use of communication can influence opinions, attitudes and behaviours of the people and make significant contributions in achieving good governance outcomes. People gain access to information through multiple channels of communication such as meetings, discussions, radio, television, newspapers etc. It is often argued that increased access to and participation in decision making process is crucial for holding governments accountable and communication for empowerment approach aims to provide necessary information and establish communication channels to enhance participation of the poor and marginalized groups and thus reduce their social and political exclusion.

Mass media especially television and radio need to be extremely used for generating programme content and audio-visual/audio packages customized for PRFs to facilitate PR functioning. The potential of media could be adequately utilized for information dissemination, capacity building of PRFs and strengthening PRIs. Mass media can play a pivotal role as ‘agents of change’ by sensitizing people through reporting on government schemes and developmental activities in rural areas. Media professionals and media organizations also need to be sensitized to report on PR issues and the significance of covering PR related issues. Media practitioners can facilitate an interface between media and women PRFs to expose them to media and provide space/time in media channels for visibility. Thus appropriate communication strategies need to be developed to facilitate the participation of women PRFs in various PR related activities to enable more women to join the PR system.

e-Panchayat

e-Panchayat - a new concept, was believed to hold great promise in the study area. However, since PRFs were not computer literate they were unable to make any meaningful use of the facility. Towards this, human resource needs to be created and VLW or Gram Rozgar Sevak (GRS) may be trained as support staff to facilitate the work of women PRFs. For e-panchayat, basic infrastructural facilities such as the Internet connectivity, computers and electricity supply will be required at Panchayat Ghars. In addition, proper seating arrangements, matting and furniture etc. will also be needed for effective implementation of the PR system. A proper

planning and implementation of e-Panchayat can go a long way in empowering PRFs and strengthening PRIs in the state.

Looking beyond Numbers

Reservation for women is an affirmative action which has brought scores of women into the PR system, but it does not guarantee their active participation in the PR system. The goal of political empowerment of women will not be accomplished by reservations alone at the same time women have gained a degree of confidence and authority due to reservations. To expedite the process of political empowerment of women it is essential to further step up confidence building measures, enhance their capabilities and remove the operational obstacles. There is a need to move ‘beyond numbers’ by involving women at all levels of governance, decision-making and policy-formulation. There is a need to build new pathways in politics and create new forms of articulation across and beyond existing democratic spaces to enhance their political participation.

It is a truism, whenever a new initiative is taken for any deprived and marginalized section of the society, it takes time for the society as well as the specific section to understand and accept the change. The advent of PR system in J&K has to be seen in the light of this statement as for generations, poor rural women located in remote areas of J&K have remained sidelined and were not part of the mainstream. Therefore it is inevitable that they will take time to understand their new role and expectations from them before making any worthwhile contribution. The need of the hour is to empower them with information, education and skills in an enabling environment. They need to be mentored to realize their full potential through participation in debates, discussions and articulating on issues that impact upon their own lives as well as their wards. Some strategic measures may also be considered for example, study visits may be arranged within as well as outside the State to help them develop contacts with other PRFs thus gain exposure and strengthen their networking. Specific pictorial training material may be designed to increase their level of political awareness and sharpen their skills. At the same time collaborative efforts need to be made to fight the discrimination and disparity faced by women PRFs in their routine PR related activities.

As postulated in the Critical Mass theory in the context of political exclusion of women that women were not likely to have a major impact on legislative outcomes until they assumed a critical mass, the current study also found that unless the number of women participating in the political institutions increased to considerable numbers; they are not likely to make much difference. In addition, the qualitative contribution and participation based on merit that produced outcome as stipulated in Critical Mass theory will enable women to work effectively and also promote women-friendly policy changes.

Effective communication strategies need to be adopted to deliberate upon the importance of women in the political sphere. Participatory and inclusive approaches drawing upon Communication for Development (C4D) strategy would help to strengthen the position of women in local governance and in turn empower them. Communication interventions can lead to their improved performance, enhanced voice and increased transparency. The communication approach incorporating the objectives of empowerment and combined with the use of an appropriate media (ranging from indigenous to local, national and international) would help to bring out an effective social change. Communication especially mass communication need to be harnessed to propagate the ideas of social change and new practices as crucial components of socio-political transformation process.

To sum up, it was postulated that the success of political empowerment of women depends on the revitalization of PRI's, drive for political education, gender sensitization campaigns, availability of support services, special mechanism to induct women at all levels of decision making etc. This could be successfully achieved by devising proper and adequate communication strategies, communication campaigns and communication packages as per the needs of women PRFs. Thus, apart from bringing in a series of constitutional reforms, a great deal needs to be done at the policy level.

As rightly pointed out by various scholars that without adequate and effective communication, economic and social development will inevitably be retarded and may be counterproductive and mass communication and the interpersonal communication were to play a key part in the greatest

social revolution of all time. Consequently, the political will and support on part of government and media is crucial for overall functioning and strengthening of local governance in the state and bringing a significant change in the lives of rural people. For true reform to take place there is need for strong political will to bring women into politics and in decision making roles. Communication can play an effective role in encouraging and facilitating various initiatives taken by the government to build public opinion and change attitudes that discriminate against women and discourage their participation in the political system.

The findings of the study have great relevance in the present context and it can be argued that mere creation of space in the political structures at grass root level is not sufficient. The 'proxy' culture in terms of taking directions and cues from male family members will not empower women. They need to assert themselves and take control over their socio-political space to ensure their presence, participation and contributions aimed at combating their political exclusion. Given the deep structural inequities that women are placed in, provisions such as reservations may serve as an enabling condition to facilitate women's political empowerment with the support of adequate structural mechanisms. The access to Information and Communication would strengthen their communication capacities so that they are able to voice opinion and participate in development debates and decision-making processes. This would not only facilitate them in influencing the political climate, policy decisions, public perceptions and community support but to seek changes in governance, power relations and even institutional functioning.

Through this study an effort was made to generate detailed insights and broader perspectives about the participation and contribution of women PRFs in the local governance in J&K. The efficacy of various communication channels available to women PRFs in discharging their roles and responsibilities as people's representatives was thoroughly explored and the support systems available to them in terms of family, community, State and mass media were examined. It is hoped that the study will contribute in devising appropriate communication strategies relevant to the needs of women PRFs and generate new insights and approaches leading to the improved functioning of PRIs.