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WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ STRUCTURE IN INDIA

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Women in Panchayati Raj Structure in India

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Abstract – The changing position of women in the Indian society has many facets as such generalization is nearly impossible because of the existence of a considerable variation between religions, rural and urban areas between classes and caste groups. Individuals differ in their cultural experiences. Migration to the urban areas, female political participation, education, the activities of social reformers and the inequalities of dowry enable women to make a relatively easy transition to new roles and responsibilities. Women are given leadership role in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) but their cultural experience shows that they learn to be docile and shy. However, it is with the help of formal and informal training, they would be able to accept the new roles and responsibilities. If the government is really serious in bringing the change then the third process of change that is freeing should be followed in which the concerned participant is given chance to show his/her abilities after having the proper training.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian society presents a very complex picture of women's status. There are rhetorical and historical evidences of highly empowered womanhood with simultaneous pejorative evidences of commoditized womanhood. Indian society worships the woman, as goddess of power (Durga), wealth (Lakshmi) and learning (Sarasvati). At the same time institutionalization of prostitution from historical times of "Devdasi" poses a threat to the women image of goddess (Devi). Most of the Indian deities are females. The pre-aryan Dravidian civilization in Mohan-jo-Daro and Harappa reflected an exalted image of women, prominently represented by mother goddess -).

In early vedic period, there seemed to be no gender division in hunting, warfare, defense and political activities. The girls were educated like boys and had to pass through a period of Bramcharya. Another important aspect of empowered womanhood was practice of "Swayambar" (self-choosing of groom). The process of deterioration of the status of women started in later Vedic period, when agricultural civilization started creating surplus and conditions of private property. This was the period of Athrva Veda. In India patriarchy started with the advent of Vedic Aryan and particularly with the advent of Sutra period (600 to 300 B.C.) where no evidence is available to generalize any notion of mass political empowerment of women.

In ancient society, the caste system with the passage of time became stereotype and rigid and criteria of birth and sex to determine the function and social status of the individual. The shift was from achievement to ascription. The social stratification process created a clear hierarchy. The concept of un-

touchability and impurity was deep rooted in the caste system. Manu code laid down the basic framework for a hierarchical caste structure. Even **Bhagwat Gita** places women, vaishyas and shudras in the same category. According to **Parasar Smriti** punishment for killing either a women or a shudra is identical, **Thapar, Romila(1985)**. The decline in position of women have occurred along with the growth of a class society from the period of **Manusmriti(500 B C to 1800 A D)**, **Jayswal, Surita, 1981**). The birth of a daughter became a source of disaster during later Vedic phase. A brief reappraisal of the position of the women in the pre independence period reveal two facts (!) a thoroughly passive attitude of the common women (2) an absence of any significant collective struggle by women (**Sangari, K and Vaid, 1989**). This legacy has come to stay in post-independence Indian women. The independence period started with a general development approach to eliminate poverty because of the presence of a number of disadvantaged groups in the country including women. It was only after nearly three decades that the women's issues were brought centre stage in 1975.

The realities of rural Indian women are difficult to comprehend. Women, most of times, are even deprived of some of the fundamental human rights and this denial is justified often in the name of tradition. On social and economic fronts, women are discriminated throughout their life, from the conception to death. In addition to subordination to male authority, they suffer from other evils as feticide, differential treatment, malnutrition, early child marriage, child labor, dowry deaths, and invisibility of their work. There is also discrimination in

administration, sciences, industry and military services..

The root cause of all this is either total or partial illiteracy or less education as compared to male counter parts. The social codes and sanctions of Manu left their marks permanently on the future status of the Indian women. **His famous dictum “a women must be her father’s shadow in childhood, her husband’s in youth, her son’s in old age”** is all well known. Indeed right from ancient times to modern age, women’s position in the society is suffered from strange somersaults; sometimes she was taken to a high pedestal from where she could dictate and sometimes brought low in the earth where nothing but kicks and pricks were her lot.

With the passage of times due to the highly praiseworthy work done by social reformers like **Rajaram Mohan Roy(1815), Pandita Ramabai(1852-1922), Swarnam Kumari Devi(1886) position of women improved. Rameshwari Nehru Roop Kumari** started journals namely, STREE DARPAN and KUMARI DARPAN respectively. In the congress session of 1906, **Sarojini Naidu** said “educate your women and nation will take care of itself.....,the hands that socks the cradle rules the world”. Contribution of **Annie Besant (1947-1933)** towards the women establishment was ever significant. In 1910 **Madam Bhikaji Rustamji Cama 1861-1936**, said “the soft hand of women is the chief factor of nation’s life”. **Mahatma Gandhi** too realized: “women in India tore down purdah and come forward to work for the nation”. In fact the condition of women in the world at large was not good. The two great wars were the turning points in the history of women empowerment as countries across the world realized the extensive work, women had done during war times.

It is the **United Nations (U N)** which has provided the lead to bring women’s issue in focus throughout the world and women development programmes and projects started. All the development agencies were convinced that it was difficult to integrate women in stereotype development projects but had to have these programmes and projects focusing especially on women’s work. It was a long way since 1975, when the year was declared by the U N as “International Women’s Year”. U N and all other countries were amazed to know the status of women in the society. In spite of so many development programmes for women, still women are not benefited and almost all the benefits were being monopolized by men, widening the gender gap in economic status. It was followed by 1975-1985 as “International Women’s Decade”. **The Mexico World Conference (1975)** during women’s year pointed out that: “problems of women who constitute half the world population are problems of the society”. **World Summit for Children(1990), “International Conference On Nutrition 1992 in Rome”, “World Conference on Human Rights(1993)”, “International Conference on Population and Development,1994”, “Fourth**

World Conference on Women(1995) at Beijing” have focused on structural changes that are necessary in the society to empower women. Scholars, International agencies and government had emphasized that to ensure women’s full and equal participation in the power structure, and the term which has come to be used for this is “empowerment of women” i.e. social, political and economic empowerment.

In India, the issues for women’s emancipation were put on the back burners after independence by our national leaders. They were concerned for building a modern India that is free from hunger, malnutrition, unemployment and poverty with a naïve belief that building a modern India would overcome all their problems. We find the resurgence of women movements in 1970s and problems of women again begin attracting attention. Reservation to women in elected bodies like Panchayats and local bodies, state legislatures and central parliament are the latest issues to be added to women’s issues. The then Chief Justice of India, **A S. Anand** in a seminar on **Rights of Women**, said “Indian legal system had adequate provisions to safeguard women’s rights, but there was a need to properly implement them. He said it was a sign of sick society and unless we revive our value system, we cannot do away with these social evils”. The then Chairperson of **Rajya Sabha, Najma Heptulla**, in a key note address said “education was the best way to empower women as it broke societal stereotypes”. The constitution of India has again guaranteed equality, liberty and dignity to the women. If social status of women is to be uplifted, education should be viewed as an agent of basic change for the status of women. An African proverb says, “If women is educated, the entire family is educated”.

During the last few decades the problems of women have attracted more and more attention of social activists, academia and policy makers. The focus has shifted from women development to women empowerment especially after the declaration of International Women Year. As a consequence of this many policies have been announced and programs launched for the welfare and development of women in India. The aim of all these is to empower women. But there is no well-defined or commonly agreed concept of women empowerment in these policies and programmes. It is, therefore desired to find or evolve a well-defined concept of women empowerment that is commonly accepted and understood without any ambiguity. As a result of this 2001 was observed as “Women Empowerment Year” and a “Task force” was set up with the main objectives to improve the access of women to the natural resources and to ensure their rightful place in the mainstream of economic development.

At this point it is necessary to be explicit about what we mean by the term empowerment. According to **Sen and Baltiwala** empowerment is the process by which powerless gain control over the circumstances of their

lives. It include both the control over resources and over ideology.....". Inherent in this definition are two ideas. The first of which is that empowerment is not power over others (a feature of dominance) but power to achieve goals and ends. The second important idea is that the concept of empowerment is more generally applicable to those who are powerless whether this is a male or female individual or a group of class or a caste.

Empowerment literally means "to invest with power". In the context of women's empowerment the term has come to denote women's increased control over their own lives, bodies and environment. In literature, women empowerment emphasizes on women's decision making role, their economic self-reliance and their legal rights to equal treatment, inheritance, and protection against all forms of discriminations, in addition, to the elimination of barriers to their access of resources such as education, health and information.

From the foregoing revelations it should be evident that the malady is too deep rooted. What is needed is a change in the basic social attitudes which took upon women as a passion rather than as a human being. The education that is imparted to women must inculcate among them a sense of dignity and self-respect. It should create in them self-confidence and equip them so as to achieve economic independence. More employment opportunities should be made available to women so that they are not driven to fall a prey to dowry hungry dogs or being smothered in the death grip of hollow feudal tradition.

Women are given leadership role in Panchayati Raj Institutions but their cultural experiences show that they learn to be docile and shy. However, it is with the formal and informal training, they would be able to accept new roles and responsibilities. If the government is really serious in bringing the change, concerned participants be given chance to show his/her abilities after having a proper training. It is essential to study the family and socio-economic background to analyze the influence of various characteristics of an individual. It is assumed that women can do much for improving their lots. Position, ability and will to work have to be generated which is the key sector of leadership. The primary challenge facing women today, therefore is to increase their participation so that they get hold of the situation and become actively involved in the process of decision making.

A brief introspection into the history of women empowerment in India reveals a few important facts:

1. Exploitation of the women has a long history;
2. It has strong economic motivations;

3. Use of religion in creating the culture of male dominance
4. Perpetuation of the culture of male dominance and of female silence through glorification of mother;
5. Denial of social opportunity and social support to the women;
6. Institutionalizing polygamy and
7. Relative docility of women.

OVERVIEW OF THE REVIEW:

Available literature indicates that women with the framework democratic polity, laws, development policy, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plans (1974-1978) onwards has been a marked shift in approach to women's issues from welfare to development to empowerment. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

Participation of women in elections to local bodies has gone beyond expectations calling for effective steps to awareness among women. The presence and representation of women in national and local bodies as well as their presence in decision making is to be encouraged and sustained. By sharing power with men, women will get rid of themselves of the main causes of their exploitation and inferior status. They will be equal partner in the framing of all the laws and their administration and also in utilizing all available opportunities for improving their socio-economic status. Women are the vital human infrastructure and their empowerment in home, health, social, economic, political and educational fields would foster the pace of social development.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY:

Conference and discussions about women issues are a welcome step but what needs to be tackled is the basic perception of the society that gives rise to the aberrations. Today in all sectors of the economy women's concerns have been flagged, but the challenge lies in converting these into reality.

If India is to march into the New Millennium as a strong and prosperous nation, women must grow and have positive self-image. Nothing can be achieved

without the all-round development of women and their involvement in national development. As rightly observed by **Nehru**, "The status of women reflects the character of the country". So, we have to look into the gender issues with more sensitivity in the New Millennium.

Decentralization in democratic functioning and decision making has been emphasized for quite some time now as the one sure solution for a better governing of India. If in the democracy, one means the close involvement of ordinary people in the governance of the country, it necessarily has to be first available at the grass root level. To quote **shri L. C. Jain**, "If India is not governed locally, it will soon be ungovernable". Hence, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution had been welcomed as focusing the attention of the nation on the political structure of rural India, their significance for the vulnerable section of the rural society and their participation in the operation of these structures.

Women being one of these vulnerable sections, their participation and role process have come in for considerable scrutiny. From the time of the freedom struggle, the need for popular participation in the democratic process had been accorded much importance. Gandhi and Nehru had evoked such participation as a political weapon against the British rulers. **Gandhi** also believed strongly that grass roots of democracy is in the form of village panchayats and considered villages to be the basic political units of the future independent nation and today the one important theme on which the recent debates on Panchayati Raj Institutions. Such a participation in turn, has been dealt with at two levels, namely (i) the representation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions either as member or as functionaries and (ii) the substance and effectiveness of such representation. In the beginning when the Panchayati Raj was introduced in India in 1959, very few women contested or got elected.

The Balvant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) had recommended that besides the 20 members of the Panchayati Raj Samiti, there should be two women who are interested to work among men as co-opted members. A similar provision was suggested with regard to the village Panchayat. The co-option as a principle however was highly questionable both in theory and practice because the women's representation became one of tokenism and proxy and ended as a near total failure. This is why, starting as early as 1976 with the publication of the report of the committee on "Status of Women" there has been demand for the representation of women in the Panchayati Raj by reservation rather than nomination. Thus, the running theme in the debates on Panchayati Raj concerning women, from 1957 to 1989, was one of how to make more women participate in the Panchayati Raj, at its various levels. In some cases, the women have come forward, but do not prove very effective, "To quote the Task Force on Panchayati Raj as reported by Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, New Delhi". In

Madhya Pradesh it was pointed out that though women constitute more than half of the population in India, their participation in the decision-making process has always been negligible. This naturally will have an impact on the decision-making process as regards reservation for women.

The Panchayati Raj Act, however, has envisaged and implemented, to a considerable extent, the participation of women in power sharing. In most of the cases, women are housewives and first time entrants in the politics, most of whom are illiterate or educated up to the primary level only. Significantly, the decision to participate in the election was not of their own volition. The outcome of the election resulted in the birth of, at least in some cases, the institution of "Sarpancha-Pati or Adhyaksh-Pati" which have started functioning in many panchayats in the states. Often illiteracy or lack of adequate education is the impediment, the outcome of which is that most of the women sound vague about their role. With the help of the training programme, however, the women are being encouraged and they are gradually coming out of the social purdah. Looking at it from a different perspective, besides education and ignorance, social pressure also prevents women from assuming their responsibilities fully. Invariable, they have to struggle to establish their presence. In addition sometimes case also plays a negative role. For Scheduled Case/Scheduled Tribes women, functioning as a panch is worse than their upper case counterparts. They feel ostracized on caste grounds. Further these women are doubly disadvantaged because of the lack of education or literacy. Hence, there is a dire need to study as to how far the women have been empowered through the Panchayati Raj system and how their education, participation and leadership qualities have paved way for their being effective in their roles.

The present study is of great importance in the present day context as there is growing realization of focusing on the women empowerment as the disadvantaged section of the society. It is a genuine attempt in this direction as it aims to study empowerment of women Panches and Sarpanches in relation to their education, participation and leadership qualities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

"WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ STRUCTURE IN INDIA "

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF THE KEY TERMS USED

Empowerment of women- Empowerment is the process by which powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It include both the control over the resources and ideology (includes, in addition to the extrinsic control) - a growing intrinsic capacity, greater self-confidence and inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers.

Women empowerment refers to empower the women in the context of human rights, basic needs, economic security, capacity building, decision making, to generate the choices. Empowerment links with the awareness, knowledge about skills, health consciousness, and education of women. In the present study empowerment of women means total score obtained on the non-directive interview schedule for empowerment of women.

Education- Mahatma Gandhi defined education, as a coordinated development of body, mind and spirit and education is the key that opens the doors of good life, which is essentially a social character. **Hale (1969)** pointed out that level of education of women is an important indicator for the understanding of the present and future status of women in the society. Gandhiji remarked long back that “educating a man is educating an individual while educating a woman is educating a family”. In the present study the term education refers to the level of education of women panches and sarpanches i.e. systematic instructions, schooling and all round training in the preparation in facing the life as it comes.

Participation- According to **Rao (1996)** participation is a means for political mobilisation, the preservation and utilization of indigenous knowledge, capacity-building, power redistribution, stronger beneficiary commitment, political education and healthier democracy. In the present study participation refers to total score obtained by women panches and sarpanches on the non-directive interview schedule.

Leadership qualities- It is the activity of influencing people to cooperate towards some common goal which they come to find desirable. In the present study leadership qualities refers to total score obtained by women panches and sarpanches on the non-directive interview schedule for assessing leadership qualities of panchayat members (panches and sarpanches).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following are the objectives of the study:

To study the profile of elected women members of Panchayats (panches and sarpanches)

1. To study the awareness of elected women members in panchayats with respect to their powers, duties and function in relation to their education.
2. To study the relationship between empowerment of elected women members of panchayats and their education.

3. To study the relationship between empowerment of elected women panchayats members and their participation.
4. To study the relationship between empowerment of elected women panchayat members and their leadership qualities.
5. To study the educational differentials among different women empowerment groups of elected women panchayat members.
6. To study the participation differentials among different women empowerment groups of elected women panchayat members.
7. To study the leadership differentials among different women empowerment groups of elected women panchayat members.
8. To develop the non-directive interview schedule for women empowerment, participation and leadership qualities.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

The following hypotheses are formulated.

1. There exists a significant positive relationship between education and empowerment of women elected women panchayat members.
2. There exists a significant positive relationship between participation and empowerment of women elected women panchayat members.
3. There exists a significant positive relationship between leadership qualities and empowerment of women elected women panchayat members.
4. There exists significant difference in education of elected women panchayats members at high moderate and low level of their empowerment.
5. There exists significant difference in participation of elected women panchayats members at high moderate and low level of their empowerment.
6. There exists significant difference in leadership qualities of elected women panchayats members at high moderate and low level of their empowerment.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was delimited to women panches and sarpanches of Kurukshetra, Ambala, and Yamunanagar districts of Haryana state.

PLAN AND PROCEDURE:

Methodology:

Keeping in view the nature and objectives of the present research, descriptive survey method has been considered to be an appropriate one, to describe and interpret what exists at present in terms of relationship and differences between education, participation and leadership qualities and empowerment of women panches and sarpanches.(panchayat members).

POPULATION AND SAMPLE:

In the present study, all the women panches and sarpanches of panchayats in Haryana state will constitute the population but, it will not be possible for researcher to conduct the study on entire population. For that she has to select the sample out of population. In the present study, focus is on the empowerment of women through panchayats in relation to their education, participation and leadership qualities. The sample is selected phase wise. Out of total districts in Haryana, three districts will be selected purposively. These districts namely Kurukshetra, Ambala and Yamunanagar which are adjacent to each other will be purposively. Thereafter, all the blocks of three districts will be taken. In this way, total blocks of the sample selected will serve the purpose of the study.

For the selection of women panches and sarpanches from the three districts, the investigator will personally visit the offices of the Block Development and Panchayat Offices (BDPO) of the sampled districts.

In any survey research, covering entire population is practically an impossible task. What is feasible and generally practiced is to study a sample representative of the population. A sample is, thus, a subset of the population under study. The aim of sampling is to choose a subset in a way that it will be adequate in size and representative of the population as a whole. It is a "miniature replica" of the population at least with respect to the characteristics under investigation if not in all aspects.

TOOLS TO BE USED FOR COLLECTION OF DATA:

For each and every type of research certain instruments are used for collecting the relevant information which are also known as tools. The selection of tools depends upon the type of data and nature of the problem. Keeping in view the nature of problem, the set of non-descriptive interview schedule as tools will be used for collecting the data:

1. A self-developed non-descriptive interview schedule for assessing the empowerment of women panches and sarpanches (panchayat members)
2. A self-developed non-directive interview schedule for assessing the participation of women panchayat members (panches and sarpanches).
3. A self-developed non-directive interview schedule for assessing the leadership qualities of women panchayat members (panches and sarpanches).

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