



Women empowerment through panchayati raj institutions in Sikkim

Minkeyla Bhutia

School of Social Sciences and Languages, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India

Abstract

Amartya Sen observed, "Unless women are empowered, issues like health, literacy, and population will remain unresolved problems in developing countries."^[1] Women's political engagement is a necessary condition for achieving gender equality and true democracy. It promotes women's direct participation in public decision-making and ensures more accountability to women. In this regard, reservation for women in the Panchayati raj institutions is an important initiative to empower women. The political participation of women got a fillip after passing the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment Acts, which ensured 33% seats for women in the panchayat and urban local bodies. In this regard, an attempt has been made to examine the women empowerment through the Panchayati Raj Institutions in Sikkim. The Sikkim Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2011, provides for a 50% reservation of seats for women in panchayats. Therefore, the prime objective of this work is to bring to light how far this reservation empowers women in the political process of Sikkim.

Keywords: local governance, women empowerment, reservation

Introduction

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, as said by Simon De Beauvoir to distinguish sex from gender and said that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired in society ^[2]. Gender is also a social construct. According to World Health Organization, "Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed ^[3]." Gender inequality is widely visible in every sphere of society, and politics is no exception in this regard. Women account for world's half of the population, but when it comes to representation at higher levels of the political process, they account for less than 10 percent. "True democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre. It must be worked from below by the people of every village. "This statement by M.K. Gandhi is quite true because, without the participation of all sections of the population in the political process, a country cannot develop in the true sense of the term. Women have long been discriminated against and excluded from political and familial matters in Indian society. Despite the enormous amount of work that women must perform daily to support their families, their voices are rarely heard, and their rights are restricted. In India's early history, women's status in practical life was inferior to that of men. However, the status of women is gradually improving in all spheres of the society. Reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has played an effective role in removing gender inequality and providing an opportunity for women to participate in the decision-making process. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1993, gave the constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions and mandated 33% reservation of seats for women in local bodies. After the passing of this Act, women's participation in local governance has increased radically. In this regard Sikkim is no exception. In the past, when Sikkim was a monarchy, there were no plans and policies to empower women, they did not take part in decision making. But after the reservation of seats for women in panchayats, women have started to take their issues and challenges politically and are getting actively involved in politics. Now, the issues have come to the forefront not only at the local level but also at the state and national level. The proportion of women elected representatives in the Panchayat election of Sikkim has improved drastically after the implementation of reservation.

Panchayati Raj Institutions in India: A Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, it can be said that Panchayat is an assembly of the village people or their representatives. Panchayati Raj is a very old Indian administrative institution for the development of village. Its main purpose was to bring the villagers into the mainstream, ensuring grassroots democracy and decentralized planning. The term 'Panchayat' if divided 'panch' means five and 'ayat' means assembly and so, the literal meaning of this term is the assembly of five or a council of five. The principle of 'panchayat' is Panch Parmeshwar, which means 'God speaking through the five ^[4]'.

The Indian Panchayati Raj system is a landmark achievement, and it has enhanced the spirit of grassroots democracy as well as democratic decentralization despite the challenging trials and tribulations it has faced since independence. The revitalization of Panchayati Raj institutions in India happened in late 90s. The late Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi towards the end of his tenure took initiative to strengthen the PRIs with his

popular slogan “power to the people”. However, the goal of empowering the rural people and ensuring their socio-economic development was accomplished by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao’s government that provided wider representation to PRIs by giving them constitutional status through 73rd Amendment Act, 1993. This act made the Indian Panchayati Raj bodies the principal agencies for the development and socio-economic transformation of Indian Village.

The Panchayati Raj system was prevalent in most of the states of India since early 1950s. However, it was only after the passing of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act that institution became an effective body of governance. Prior to that no elections were held, and the PRIs did not play an active role. The 73rd constitutional amendment act provided the framework of Panchayati Raj system at three levels with regular election throughout India. After the act was passed, the fresh Panchayati Raj laws were enacted by the states and Union Territories. Some of them amended their existing laws. This process was completed within one year of the establishment of the amendment act by April 1994. Elections were held to the PRIs in accordance with the states and were held under the direct supervision of newly appointed state election Commission. The states also set up their respective finance Commission to report on the sharing of finance resources between the local government bodies and state government.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act made the PRIs as full-fledged constitutional. Schedule XI with 29 development subjects that must be taken up by PRIs was added too. The act led to the establishment of three tier Panchayati Raj with five-year tenure. It also consists of provisions regarding regular elections of PRIs formation of grams creating of a state finance Commission and state election Commission, reservation for SC, ST, and women and above all devolution of more power and responsibilities to PRIs.

73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993 and Women Empowerment

Political participation encourages people to take part in decision making process and determining the policy which affects their needs. Participation of women in political process is significant as it strengthens the democracy and helps them to highlight their issues and negotiate in a finer way. However, women’s participation in the political process is marginally low and they continue to remain marginalized in decision making bodies. Though after 1993, the number of women’s participation at grass root level has increased, it is necessary to bring both quantitative and qualitative change in their participation. Amartya Sen rightly pointed out that “Democracy is not only the goal of development, but also the primary means of development ^[5]”. For strengthening democracy women’s participation in the political process is important. Women’ in the political field is necessary for their advancement and for creating a gender equal society. Women must be involved and included in decision making process so that their demands can be included in national agenda. Despite an increase in the literacy rates and political awareness, the level of political participation of women has been quite low. Likewise, the increase in the proportion of women’s participation is of little value without enhancing their qualitative participation. Participation of women in the national freedom movement shows the fact that women can display excellent qualities of leadership. The names such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru, Kasturba Gandhi, are popularly known for their leadership in freedom struggle. Sarojini Naidu initiated the demand of women’s franchise and led a delegation of Indian women in British parliament in 1917. The Reforms Act of 1921 provided the women right to vote, but there were certain restrictions based on property, wifehood, education. The Govt. of India Act of 1935 gave the voting rights to women excluding the condition of marriage. Finally, the equal political and legal rights to women were granted by the constitution of India in 1950. Even after the constitutional provision, the participation and representation of women is far from satisfactory. After the release of report by the committee on the status of women in India in 1973, the demand for more representation of women in political institution was taken seriously. Prior to this the focus was mainly on improvement of the social and economic position of women. The National Perspective Plan of 1988 pointed out the need for reservation of 30% seats for women in local government. The passing of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in 1993 gave a new way for participation of women in PRIs by providing 33% reservation seats in rural and urban local bodies. As a result of this over 10,00,000 women are enjoying political power in different decision-making levels as a member or chairperson ^[6].

After 1993, The PRIs empowering the rural women has operated differently in different states of India and it is impossible to generalize its positive impact uniformly across the country The empowerment of women through the 73rd and 74th Amendment Act has removed the several myths like women are not interested in politics, only the upper strata women will come through reservation, they are the proxies of male members in the family. The inclusion of more women in the structure of governance is changing these structures so that the concerns of women are reflected more closely. They are making the government more aware of the issues like poverty, inequality, gender justice.

Feminist discourse on gender analyses the marginalization of women in social, political, and economic spheres due to division of spheres of action into private and public. While the private sphere is seen to belong to women, the public sphere like that of politics is seen to belong to men ^[7]. However, women are slowly travelling from the private to public sphere due to opportunity provided to them in local governance. The 73rd Amendment Act which mandates for providing 33% seats for women has pressurized the political parties to include women in their candidates list. The entry of women in PRIs has not only widened their understanding about the working of politics but has also helped women to affirm their identity as women. They are also realizing that their strength does not come from their numbers but their skills and knowledge therefore they are demanding more training

programmes to understand the role of PRIs. Women are changing governance in PRIs by focusing more on issues like education, drinking water, health facilities and focusing on action against child marriage, domestic violence etc.

Panchayati Raj Institutions in Sikkim

Sikkim follows the democratic system of governance after it got merged with India in 1975. In 1993 Sikkim introduced Panchayati Raj Act to conform to the 73rd Amendment Act. Prior to that when Sikkim was a kingdom there were landlords or Zamindars called Kazi. Under the Kazi there were Mandals and Karbaris who use to look after the workings in the field and collect taxes. In 1948 as soon as the Zamindari and Addas under the landlords were abolished, the first attempt to establish Panchayats consisting of landlords and four other members from the block selected by the people were made. These Panchayats were quasi-judicial or Nyaya Panchayats. In December 1965, Sikkim Panchayat Act came into force. The act was promulgated to amend the provisions related to Panchayat system in Sikkim. The main goal behind setting up this Panchayat was for the rural development and enable people's participation at village level. Each Panchayats was assigned 16 duties and term was three years. The Panchayats had resources like house tax, 10% of land revenue of the block, grants from Darbar to fulfill the duties assigned to them. Reservation for minorities was also provided by the Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1965^[8]. It also envisioned the constitution of Zilla Panchayats at the district level. Sikkim entered the new stage of decentralization after implementing the 73rd constitutional amendment act, 1993^[9]. Sikkim follows the two-tier Panchayati Raj system with Gram Panchayat at the village level and Zilla Panchayat at the district level. The Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1993 gave authority to levy taxes, rates and fees to the Gram Panchayats and the Zilla Panchayats. The duties such as holding of periodic elections, enabling legislations to transfer the funds, functions, constitution of State Finance Commission in case of Rural Local Bodies has been cast by the constitution to the State Government. The provisions laid down by Sikkim Durbar was reinforced by the Act of 1982 and it remained in force till 1993^[10].

The Sikkim Panchayati Raj Act was passed in 1993 through which the Panchayati Raj institutions were recognised^[11]. Two tier system was established with Gram Panchayat at the village level and Zilla panchayat at the district level of governments. There was no provision for intermediary level of Panchayat because the population of Sikkim is less than 20 lakhs. After the Panchayat Act in 1993 was enforced, remarkable amendments in the Panchayati Act were made by the government of Sikkim from time to time to empower and strengthen panchayat system in the state of Sikkim. One such amendment was made in 2011 which increased the percentage of reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions from 40 to 50 percent.

Sikkim has consistently been acknowledged as the best state in country for its excellent performance in strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The state government has adopted such strategy that includes people's involvement, mixes power decentralization and benefit centric activities. Schemes related to development are implemented at the grassroots level. The state has taken landmark decision towards the rejuvenation of Panchayati Raj in Sikkim by ensuring that all the villagers take part in the political process. It is the duty of PRIs to look after the schools, health centers, libraries, various projects for the development of village. Also, the training workshops are organized for betterment of the villagers. The state government has made great efforts to help women who are socially, politically, and economically underprivileged. The Sikkim Panchayat Act was amended in 2005 to insert provision related to one-third reservation for women in Gram Panchayat to ensure active participation of women in decision making. In 2007 this was increased to 40 percent reservation for women. After the 2012 Panchayat election the reservation of women was raised to 50 percent.

Women Empowerment through PRIs in Sikkim

The Himalayan state of Sikkim has been witnessed to gender gap, discrimination, and inequalities due to the traditions and culture of society, ritualism, and customs but in the present day there is progress in the context of status of women due to modern education system, social awareness, and support of the government. Position of women in Sikkim, a few decades ago was weak in terms of fundamental rights, law, and equality within a society. In a patriarchal system woman was a weak subject within family who did not get equal opportunities in comparison to male. When Sikkim was under the monarchy women were socially exploited and did not have any rights. The old norms of Sikkim clearly showed the gender biasness as it did not provide property inheritance rights to the women. However, in the second half of 1990 the government came up with series of women empowerment policies and schemes to enhance the women's status from the grassroot level. Women started getting socio-political, economical, and other opportunities which improved their conditions tremendously. Government to prevent early marriage started to provide fixed deposit and some incentive to girls. In 2009 Sikkim election more political awareness among women was seen as the female voters with 82.77% was higher than men with 81.46 % in a staggering 23 constituencies. For the first time in the history of Sikkim, women were appointed as the cabinet ministers, chief secretary etc^[12]. In 2011 Sikkim became the first state in Northeast to increase the reservation of women from 40 percent to 50percent. Another great initiative taken by the Sikkim government was seeking succession bill 2008 to empower women socially. The bill gave the right to acquire or inherit property with some conditions to women.

During the reign of Chogyal in Sikkim there were no schemes to empower the local women. The women did not play any role in major decision-making process as the old law did not give any rights to them. Women were engaged in household activities, agricultural activities etc. They were enclosed to private spare and in the public

spheres like village meetings their participation was at lowest level. The status of women in Sikkim varied from community to community. Local religious practice and customs plays a vital role in influencing the status of women. When Sikkim was under monarchy most of the parts was controlled by the landlords or Kazis. The post of landlords and king ministry was not given to women and peasant women were utilized for pleasure by the landlords.

The Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal along his wife Hope Cook made a great contribution in representing the identity of Sikkim in international level. The two women of Sikkim with their support attended the conference which was held in Manila on women's leadership. They also represented the Sikkim by displaying items like national flag of Sikkim, booklet on Sikkim's history and religious painting. After such development on 15th March 1969 Sikkim Durbar proclaimed that the Sikkimese citizenship will be taken away from those women who marries non-Sikkimese.

Currently women comprise 47% of the total population of Sikkim^[13]. The social position of women in Sikkim is better compared to other states of the country. Participation in decision-making process is more as compared to other states of India. In 1990s the government of Sikkim initiated number of women empowerment policies to uplift the status of women. Schemes like small family scheme encouraged women and prevented early marriage in continue their studies. Sikkim's sex ratio is improving. As per the 2011 census there were 889 women per thousand men in Sikkim. In terms of political participation of women Sikkim has made a slow yet steady progress. The one-third reservation for women in Panchayat was raised to 40 percent and later to 50 per cent. The increasing number of elected women representatives can be seen from 2005 election to 2017 election^[14]. The similar trend is seen in Zilla Panchayat figures. However, political empowerment of women in the real sense is yet to be achieved. After the passing of Sikkim Panchayat Amendment Act, there are many changes like providing 50 % reservation to women in Panchayat. Women in Panchayat have marked the beginning in establishing their position. The reservation system for women in Panchayat, have been of great significance for their active participation in political sphere.

The 73rd Amendment Act came into force on 24th April 1993. This act played a significant role in promoting grass root democracy in the state of Sikkim. The Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1993 provide one third of out of total seats for women in PRIs^[15]. The Panchayat election 1997 was the first election held in accordance with the provision. After the merger with Indian Union, Sikkim witnessed nine Panchayat elections till now (i.e., in 1976, 1983, 1988, 1993, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017). Through the Sikkim Panchayat Act 2007, the percentage of seats reserved for women was raised from 33 to 40 %. The Sikkim Panchayat Act was amended further in 2011 which provided 50 percent reservation of seats in Gram Panchayats and Zilla Panchayats to women^[16]. The proportion of elected women representatives in PRIs of Sikkim their number is equal to men. The 50% reservation has played a great role in improving the political status of women in Sikkim. The Panchayat elections held after the 73rd Amendment Act from 1997 till 2017 shows the increasing number of women members in Gram Panchayat. The election held after providing 50% reservation to women in 2012 and 2017 shows a lot of improvement as the number of women is equal to male^[17]. The proportion of women in local bodies has reached the gender parity unlike state legislature. At present there are equal numbers of men and women present in the local bodies of Sikkim. These positive changes in local bodies are brought by the reservation policy of the government. The 73rd and the 74th Amendment Acts laid down the provisions for reservation of one third of seats for women in Panchayats and Municipalities. It has emerged as a powerful instrument in removing gender imbalance in lower level of Government.

Conclusion

For the first time in political history of India one third of the total seats were reserved for women in the local self-government institutions. This great change was brought by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993. After the passing of this Act, the proportion of women representatives in local governance all over India including Sikkim has increased drastically.

However, there are two aspects of political participation, quantitative and qualitative. Though the quantitative participation has increased through the constitutional provision the qualitative participation is yet to be achieved. Reservation is only the first step towards women empowerment and can be successful only when such environment is created which will enable women to participate. Although the local governance in India is being transformed by PRIs the significant challenge is sustaining the change. The steps to be taken to improve the quality of women's participation are providing proper training and literacy skills which will boost the low confidence among rural women.

Moreover, even though one third of the post had been reserved for women there may not be enough candidates. The need of the hour is to bring women to centre stage of the political process. For this not only government but women activists, voluntary organisations must come together. Low participation of women in politics is due to criminalization and fractionalization of politics, emergence of fundamentalism at macro level, lack of awareness. There is a need for reservation of seats because of social and economic conditions of women. There is no worthwhile representation of women in parliament and state assembly.

Following recommendations is suggested for greater women's participation in Politics. To achieve substantial women's participation multiparty politics is crucial. To drive change from within political parties must include more women. There must be proportional representation electoral systems as it creates chances for fairer

representation of women in politics. Also, a strong women's movement must be established for setting standards, norms, and accountability.

Reference

1. Pamela Singla. Women's Participation in Panchayati Raj: Nature and Effectiveness. Rawat Publication, 2017.
2. Narayana EA. Panchayati Raj in Action. Kalpaz Publications, 2008.
3. Pratap Chandra Swain. Panchayati Raj. APH Publishing, 2008.
4. Dipika Anil Chaudhari. Panchayati Raj System in India: Issue and Challenges. Abd Publishers, 2019.
5. Bidyut Chakrabarty, Rajendra Kumar Pandey. Local Governance in India. Sage Publications India Private Limited, 2018.
6. Niraja Gopal Jayal, Amit Prakash, Pradeep K. Sharma. Local Governance in India: Decentralization and Beyond. Oxford University Press, 2017.
7. Laxmikant M. Indian Polity, McGraw Hill Education Private Limited, 2021.
8. Barthwal CP. Understanding Local Self Government. Bharat Book Centre, 2018.
9. Rajesh Kumar Sinha. Local Government and Women Empowerment in India. Abhijeet Publications, 2021.
10. Dharampal. Panchayati Raj as the basis of Indian Polity: An Exploration into the Proceeding of the Constituent Assembly. Rashtrrothana Sahitya, 2021.
11. Sikligar PC. Blue Rose Publishers, 2020.
12. Samapti Saha, Kanak Kanti Bagchi. Reservation in Local Self Government and Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women. Abhijeet Publications, 2019.
13. Arunachalam P. Economic Impact and Political participation of Women in India. New Delhi: Global Research Publication, 2011.
14. Sharmistha Sinha. Women Empowerment in rural India. New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2012.
15. Bina Agarwal. A field of One's: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1994.
16. Basnet LB. Sikkim: A short Political History. New Delhi: S. Chand and Co, 1974.
17. Nirmala Buch. Panchayats and Women. In George Mathew (Eds), Status of Panchayati Raj in the States and Union Territories of India. New Delhi: Concept, 2000.
18. Durga P. Chhetri. Sikkim Chronicle. Siliguri, Dipali Publisher, 2019.
19. Articles and Journals
20. Priya Lakshmi C. Present Scenario of Panchayati Raj in India. Proceeding of the Indian History Congress, 2018:77:1016-22.
21. Bidyut Mohanty. Panchayati Raj, 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Women. Economic and Political Weekly, 1995:30(52):3346-50.
22. Narain I. The Concept of Panchayati Raj and Its Institutional Implications in India. Asian Survey, 1965:5(9):456-66.
23. Prasad RC. Local Government and Development in India. International Political Science Review, 1980:1(2):265-279.
24. Mahi Pal. Panchayati Raj and Rural Governance: Experiences of a Decade. Economic and Political Weekly, 2004:39(2):137-143.
25. Gopal Sharma, Ranjan Kr. Das. Women In Grassroots Democracy in India: Non-Governmental Organisations and Its Possibilities. The Indian Journal of Political Science, 2008:69(4):815-23.
26. Sandeep Tambe, Arrawatia ML, Anil K Ganeriwala. Managing Rural Development in the Mountain State of Sikkim, India: Experiences, Innovative Approaches, and Key Issues. Mountain Research and Development, 2012:32:(2):242-252.
27. Khanna M. Political Participation of Women in India. The Indian Journal of Political Science, 2009:70(1):55-64.
28. Praveen Rai. Electoral Participation of Women in India: Key Determinants and Barriers. Economic And Political Weekly, 2011:46(3):47-55.
29. Bidyut Mohanty. Panchayati Raj, 73rd Constitutional Amendment and Women. Economic and Political Weekly, 1995:30(52):3346-3350.
30. Prabhakar RP. Local Government's Administrative System in India. The Indian Journal of Political Science, 2011:72(4):943-52.
31. Sinha AC. The Feudal Polity and Political Development in Sikkim. Indian Anthropologist, 1973:3(2):71-87.