

WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT

Dr Rajesh Kumar Sinha

Reservation for women in PRIs provided by 73rd CAA and subsequent increase in the quota by States have brought an unprecedented huge number of women in governance arena in India. Women's political empowerment of such magnitude is among the best in the world. A quarter century has passed since the above-mentioned Act came into force and in most of the States fourth or fifth generation of Panchayats are in place. Women leadership in Panchayats which started with a shaky beginning has definite signals of getting well established and recognised.

Women constitute half of the population. Issue of political empowerment of women has attracted global attention. The United Nations (UN) adopted Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1952. UN has organized four World Conferences on Women. Fourth was held in Beijing in 1995 and it declared that women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. It also affirmed that women should have at least a 30% share of decision making positions.¹

However, participation of women, in general, in politics and public life in India has been abysmally low. There is a huge gap between men and women in political activities beyond voting. Participation of women at the higher level is lower in comparison to

their participation at the lower level of governance structure². In the domestic arena leadership and managerial skills of women are silently recognized however, they are not given space in the public arena. While other marginalized communities such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes got reservations in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies, no reservation for women was given in the Constitution of India in the beginning which restricted their political empowerment.

Constitutional Provisions:

Article 15 (3) to the Constitution of India empowers State to make special provisions for women. This constitutional mandate is recognition of the fact that women in India need to be empowered socially and economically so as to ensure their full participation in social, economic



and political activities of the country. However, to make use of potential of women and also to empower them, 73rd Amendment Act 1992 (73rd CAA) for the first time provided one-third reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and thus ushered a new era of women's participation in the local governance in India. However, journey of political empowerment of women in Panchayats has evolved gradually. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report (1959) had suggested only that the 20-member Panchayat Samiti should co-opt or nominate two women interested in work among women and children.

The Ashok Mehta Committee Report (1978) recommended a two-tier panchayat system, in which the two women who polled the highest number of votes in the panchayat elections would, even if they failed to actually get elected, stand co-opted into the panchayat. Where no women contested elections, any two women known to be active community workers, could be co-opted. National Perspective Plan for Women (1988) recommended 30 percent reservation for women in these bodies. Meanwhile, some states had already proceeded to provide reservations for women. In 1985, Karnataka introduced 25 percent reservation for women in the Mandal Praja Parishads, with a further reservation for women belonging to the SCs and STs. Andhra Pradesh, too, had in 1986 provided for reservation of 22-25 percent for the Gram Panchayat (GP), with two women to be co-opted in the Panchayat Samitis, in addition to the elected women members.³

Article 243D of the Constitution of India introduced through above-mentioned 73rd CAA provides that one-third of the total number of seats and offices of the Chairpersons in PRIs at each level shall be reserved for women to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. Such reservations of seats and offices of the chairpersons for women are also within the reservations for SCs and STs in all three tiers of PRIs. That mean not less than one-third of all seats and offices reserved for SCs and STs.

Although 73rd CAA provides for only 1/3rd reservation for women in PRIs, as many as 19 States (Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana) have raised reservation of

seats and offices of chairpersons to women to 50%.⁴ Efforts are on to increase the reservation from 1/3rd to 1/2 all over India.

There are approximately 13.45 lakh Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) in PRIs which constitute 46.14% of total Elected Representatives (ERs). The State-wise details are available at the website of Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GOI (<http://www.panchayat.gov.in/women-representation-in-pris>).

Achievements of Women in PRIs:

Due to patriarchy and perceived threat of male losing their domination of the political system, potential and achievements of elected women in PRIs was not recognized in the beginning. They were dismissed as proxies of their husbands and other male members of their families and at times as proxies of elites in the village. Their capacity to understand the process of governance and to lead the affairs of panchayats was questioned. However, many women elected representatives have made their mark in bringing positive changes in their areas.

For example, woman Sarpanch of Chandsamand GP in Karnal district of Haryana has developed a three pond system under MGNREGA with the purpose to treat the grey water and further use the same for gardening, kitchen gardening and irrigation purposes. For the beautification of the ponds, a green belt has been developed around the pond. Dhauj, another woman headed GP in Haryana has taken several initiatives towards empowerment of women. Among these are skill development of women and girls, bridging the digital divide through mobile computer training institute, motivating and orienting school girls on their rights, campaign against Purdha/Ghunghat (veil) system etc. An MBA graduate who quit her corporate career with one of the country's biggest telecom firms to become the sarpanch of Soda GP in Rajasthan has been working ever since to ensure clean water, solar power, paved roads, toilets and a bank to the village.

Woman Sarpanch of Dhani Miyan Khan GP in Haryana built a training centre for women and ensured that every village child went to school. Under her guidance, her village won many awards for its good sanitary conditions, zero dropout rate and the best sex ratio among all villages in Haryana. Former investment banker, woman Sarpanch of

Dhunkapara GP in Odisha launched a campaign to revive traditional folk art in her village and ensured that the benefits of the various government schemes reach the needy and deserving people. She has introduced the benefits of Public Distribution System to her village, which wasn't known to most people. Now they avail wheat, kerosene and other items at subsidised prices. She also started a major literacy campaign for women in the panchayat where only signatures would be recorded for official applications, instead of thumb impressions. Her work was recognized internationally when she was selected to be a part of International Visitors Leadership Program by the US Consulate to speak on the importance transparency and accountability in the government.

Woman Sarpanch of Abdullah Badkheda returned from United States and is now working towards making her GP a model GP by ensuring most effective implementation of government schemes. Under the leadership of it's woman Sarpanch, Khetri GP in Assam has achieved 100% institutional delivery, 100% immunization, near 100% drinking water coverage, sanitation coverage and 80% all weather road connectivity in the GP. Apart from that, organises regular health camps, organised legal literacy camps for women and provided shelters to victims of domestic violence and destitute women. Woman Gram Pradhan of Namkhana GP in West Bengal has ensured functional standing committees on women and children in her GP. She has emphasized on SHG formation, joyful learning and nutritious food for the children. Her GP maintains records and contact details of women out-migrating for work.

Pattanaik (2010) studied functioning of EWRs in many panchayats and found "it is clear that women's leadership in panchayats is transforming India. These elected women-now role models to the other women in their communities- are altering the development agenda to address issues critical to village life. The success stories number in millions. Women throughout India- from Orissa to Assam to Uttar Pradesh to Bihar- are ensuring that roads are repaired, electricity is brought to their villages, schools are built, latrines installed, medical services are available, water sources are made safe, local savings groups are formed, and the list goes on and on."⁵

IndiaSpend study 2017 in six districts of Tamil Nadu has found that 60% women

elected representative of PRIs are functioning independently of their male family members or colleagues.⁶

All that elected women representatives of PRIs have been able to achieve does not mean that all the hurdles have vanished.

Challenges before EWRs:

EWRs continue to face many challenges. Important among these challenges are:

- (i) **Patriarchy:** Except a few tribal societies, particularly in north-east, Indian society in general continues to suffer from patriarchy. Many EWRs continue to work as a rubber stamp for their family members and also at times as proxies of rural elites. Their male co-workers show insensitivity and refuse to cooperate. Burden of household responsibilities, purdah (veil) system and domestic violence negatively affect their functioning.
- (ii) **Caste System:** Hierarchical caste system in rural India makes it difficult for women from SC and ST communities to function independently and effectively. Community or Khap panchayats functions parallel to panchayats and pressurizes EWRs to act in a particular way.
- (iii) **Lack of Cooperation from Line/Sectoral Departments:** EWRs, particularly the first timers find it very difficult to deal with officials of block/district administration and of line/sectoral departments. Bureaucratic apathy and corruption is rampant which makes these EWRs demotivated and disenchanted from the panchayati raj. People's expectation to deliver coupled with non-cooperation of administration frustrate these EWRs so much so that many a times they are unwilling to contest for the next term.
- (iv) **Inadequate Capacities:** Majority of EWRs enter into public life for the first time and do not have enough knowledge and skills to handle affairs of panchayats. Training programmes conducted by government training agencies are unable to cover all elected representatives in time. A large number of ward members do not get an opportunity to attend any training in their entire term. At times they are also not allowed by their family members to travel and stay alone during

the residential trainings. Lack of education also puts constraints on EWRs. However, educational criteria introduced by a few States such as Rajasthan and Haryana have brought educated women and girls to Panchayats who are learning fast and are able to function effectively.

(v) **Rotation of Terms:** Policy of reservation for only one term and rotation of reserved seats and posts of chairperson also hinders consolidation of leadership qualities among EWRs as it takes time for them to learn the skills of handling and negotiating various conflicting interests within the panchayat. By the time they learn these skill and start functioning effectively, their term is over. Main reason behind their not being elected to PRIs cited by EWRs is dereservation of seats and offices of chairpersons. So far only five States namely Chattisgarh, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha and Karnataka have already made provisions for two term reservation of seats and offices of chairpersons.

(vi) **Encroachment and Non-Payment of Taxes/ Fees:** Elected representative in general and specially EWRs face resistance from community if they want to remove encroachment from panchayat land/properties. Many a times they are subjected to violence from powerful elements of the society. Many rural households do not want to pay taxes and fees on time

while expect panchayats to deliver public services and good in time. Insistence by EWRs are resisted at times by violent protests.

(vii) **Two Child Norm:** A few States are still continuing with the two child norm for contesting panchayat elections. In rural areas women hardly have any say in the number of children in the family and such laws restrict their entry into panchayats.

(viii) **Inadequate Women Panchayat Functionaries:** EWRs are more comfortable with women functionaries. However, there are very few women panchayat functionaries. Patriarchal mindsets make it difficult for EWRs to freely interact with male functionaries at times when it is required.

To help EWRs overcome these challenges to be able to contribute effectively in bringing positive changes in rural areas, the Government of India along with State Governments has undertaken several initiatives.

Initiatives of Government:

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR), commissioned a Study on elected women representatives in Gram Panchayats. The Study was based on a nationwide survey and its report was released on 24th April, 2008. This Study helped analyse various issues related to EWRs and it also



investigated their socio-economic profile, tracked their political careers and examined the quality of their post-election participation in terms of performance of their roles and responsibilities.

In order to bring about 50% reservation for women in Panchayats in all States, a Constitution Amendment Bill namely the Constitution (One Hundred and Tenth Amendment) Bill, 2009 was introduced in the Lok Sabha on 26.11.2009. However, the matter was not taken up presumably because of other important businesses in the House. Present government has also tried to revive this proposal.

For capacity building of ERs of PRIs, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) has been making continuous efforts by launching and implementing various schemes like Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Yojana (RGSY); Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyan (PMEYSA); capacity building component of Backward Region Grants Fund (BRGF), Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan (RGPSA) and recently launched Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA). These schemes also have strong component of capacity building of EWRs. For example, objectives of PMEYSA were to enable women Panchayat leaders to come together to (a) articulate their problems as women Panchayat leaders, (b) discuss issues regarding the institutional mechanisms for their empowerment, (c) come up with a charter of issues to be mainstreamed into policy and advocacy support so that their concerns are addressed by the process of development adopted by the State and the three-tier PRI system, and (d) form an association of the EWRs with elected office bearers and with cascading representation of EWRs from the district level and divisional level EWRs organizations. For the capacity building of EWRs in PRIs, National Capability Building Framework (NCBF) of the MoPR has recommended customized training programmes based on training needs assessment.⁷ The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD) in collaboration with the MoPR has undertaken a countrywide program of training the EWRs in various areas like engineering (building of roads, drains, latrines etc.), finance, social development, education, health, and environment among others.

States have also been taking steps to build capacities of EWRs in PRIs. For example, State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD) Jharkhand

has created a special Women's Resource Centre for capacity building of EWRs. Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) has conducted training of Elected Women Standing Committee Chairpersons on leadership. Government of Madhya Pradesh under its Umaria pilot made a short and intensive field-based intervention of four months duration aimed to enhance leadership skills of women GP Sarpanches in the tribal majority district of Umaria. Government of Maharashtra organised non-residential training programme at the doorstep of EWRs in the villages of their residence under its Kranti Jyoti project.

For effective utilization of Fourteenth Finance Commission (FFC) grants, MoPR has developed model guidelines and manual for preparation of holistic participatory Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP). Subsequently all States have also developed their state specific guidelines with provisions for active participation of EWRs in planning process. To ensure women's participation in decision making, States have been provided financial and technical assistance by MoPR for capacity building of EWRs and SHGs on preparation of GPDP.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as an important support institution for EWRs of PRIs. In Kerala where Kudumbashree has promoted active SHG movement, a very high proportion of elected representatives are from SHGs background. Learning from this, National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) has successfully facilitated PRI-SHG/CBO convergence project in several states including Assam, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Project envisages developing a strong community cadre and local institutions to improve the reach and quality of public service delivery. MoPR has issued an advisory to all State Governments in 2016 to ensure PRI-SHG/CBO convergence. Among other things, this advisory suggests to develop an institutionalised framework for Gram Panchayat-SHGs interface, inclusion of SHGs/ federations in community based monitoring of schemes and projects of GPs.⁸ Sumit Bose Committee on Performance Based Payments for Better Outcomes in Rural Development Programmes has observed that SHGs being active organisations of women can hope to link up with elected women representatives in a mutually beneficial partnership. Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India too has



issued a comprehensive advisory and guidelines in May 2018 on panchayat – SHG convergence at GP level. Among other things, the advisory expects SHGs to help GPs conduct gender status study and ensure the gender needs of the community and reflect these in local plan/GPDP; enroll EWRs as members of SHGs and groom them as community resource persons.⁹

MoPR has organized special events like orientation of women Sarpanches at national level. One such event was organized at Vijaywada in 2016 for woman Sarpanchs from Fifth Schedule Areas. Such events not only serve as opportunity for capacity enhancement but also networking with EWRs of other States and regions.

MoPR has also issued various advisories to States with regard to EWRs. All the States governments and UT administrations were advised to impress upon PRIs to ensure the safety of EWRs and female Sarpanchs, particularly those belonging to the weaker sections. They should not be physically harmed, assaulted or humiliated in any manner. Discrimination of any kind against them should not be allowed to remain unheeded and be resolved expeditiously. To put a curb on the cases of proxy attendance by relatives of women EWRs, States have

been advised to issue order that the officers, in whose presence such meetings are held, should be proceeded against departmentally. MoPR has also issued advisories to States to instruct GPs to celebrate international women's day on 8th March and to involve SHG women and women Swachhata Doots actively in these celebrations.¹⁰

To further strengthen women leadership in PRIs, consistent efforts need to be made by governmental and non-governmental agencies in this direction.

Way Forward:

Government of India may revive the proposal to amend Article 243D of Part IX of the Constitution to increase reservation for women in Panchayats from existing one-third to 50% across States. This proposal may also contain a provision to provide for rotation of reserved seats in Panchayats for a minimum of two terms instead of one at present. If any seat reserved for women becomes vacant, it should be filled by a woman candidate only.

In some of the standing committees/sub-committees such as those looking after subjects such as women and child development, drinking

water and sanitation, education, health etc., EWRs may be more effective. State governments may make it mandatory to have an EWR as chairperson of these committees. In addition, it may be made mandatory in every meeting of GP and also standing/ functional committees at least half of the members must be EWRs. Similarly committees to be formed under various central and state schemes on these subjects such as Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC) under National Rural Health Mission, School Management Committee (SMC) under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)/ Right to Education (RTE) may have EWRs of Panchayats as members.

Like Maharashtra, other States may also make it mandatory to organize Mahila Sabha (Women Gram Sabha) immediately before the meeting of Gram Sabha. Mahila Sabha will not only help identify and articulate issues and concerns of women in the Gram Sabha but will also increase participation of women which in turn will be a great moral support for EWRs. It may also be made mandatory by States to have at least 50% attendance of women in the quorum for Gram Sabha meetings.

Recruitment of women as panchayat secretaries at all the three levels of PRIs will also create a comfortable working environment for EWRs. To enable this, free of cost residential quarters and protection may be provided to women secretaries to encourage them to stay at panchayat headquarters.

Governments may also provide additional honorarium to EWRs particularly from marginalized communities. Because they have to work for their livelihoods in addition to carrying out daily household chores, they find it difficult to devote necessary time to manage affairs of panchayats.

Government of India in collaboration with State governments and State Election Commissions must also prepare a socio-economic profile data base of all EWRs in PRIs. Such data base may have details of their age, marital status, education, primary occupation, economic category, term as EWR etc. of EWRs in addition to their names, contact details and date of election. Such details will not only provide information on their current profile but will also help plan interventions for their capacity building and empowerment.

Imparting functional literacy to illiterate EWRs within a couple of months of their elections, ensuring that each EWRs receive induction training within six months and then undergoes thematic/ refresher trainings at least once every year will enhance their capacity and boost their confidence. Exposure visits of model panchayats headed by women and fully women run Panchayats can be organised to directly learn from the achiever herself. In addition to training and exposure visits, arrangements should be made to have few woman mentors at cluster of GP or block level for regular handholding EWRs particularly of Ward Members and Sarpanch of GPs. These mentors may be sourced from trained SHG leaders, women ex-Sarpanchs and social activists.

In capacity building of EWRs governments must also invite and involve civil society organizations, women's groups, academic institutions (particularly centers for women's/ gender studies), corporate social responsibility foundations and also international organizations like UNWomen. A multi-stakeholder's, collaborative, multi-pronged, systematic efforts to enhance capacities of EWRs are required.

Male elected representative and functionaries of PRIs and husbands of EWRs must undergo gender sensitization programme. During the training programmes it is observed that husbands or any other male relatives accompany EWRs. Rather than seeing as a burden, these people may be oriented on panchayati raj and also sensitized on gender issues. They may also be exposed to achievements of EWRs and made to interact with proud family members of achiever EWRs, particularly those who have received national panchayat awards.

SHGs convergence with PRIs particularly with village level Panchayats must be pursued vigorously. Advisories issued by the MoPR and MoRD in this regard must be fully complied with by States. As advised by the MoPR, all State governments must make institutional arrangements for SHGs regular interface with the GPs. Such interface will not only support EWRs in carrying out their functions effectively but will also prepare a cadre of SHG members ready to take up leadership roles in PRIs.

Network of EWRs may be created at block and district levels. Their regular meetings will facilitate exchange of experiences in overcoming challenges. Such networks will also help EWRs raise and register their specific demands with authorities. Network of EWRs may also work as a support group to EWRs whenever they are in trouble.

Finally as recommended by Aiyer Committee regular surveys of the status of EWRs and their performance and contribution in different parts of the country may be conducted by the government in collaboration with academic institutions. Such surveys will also help identify issues and concerns of EWRs to be addressed by government.

Conclusion:

To sum up, reservation for women in PRIs provided by 73rd CAA and subsequent increase in the quota by States have brought an unprecedented huge number of women in governance arena in India. Women's political empowerment of such magnitude is among the best in the world. A quarter century has passed since the above-mentioned Act came into force and in most of the States fourth or fifth generation of Panchayats are in place. Women leadership in Panchayats which started with a shaky beginning has definite signals of getting well established and recognised. However, EWRs have still not been able to realise their full potential as they face many challenges including patriarchy, inadequate capacities and self-confidence, rotation of terms etc. Government of India and State governments are making sincere efforts to strengthen EWRs through various initiatives of capacity building, promoting network of EWRs, SHGs-PRI convergence etc. Much more is desired to be done to further strengthen the hands of EWRs in future. Among these are nationwide 50% reservations, rotation of terms only after minimum two terms, timely induction and refresher trainings, exposure visits, mentoring and handholding of EWRs in PRIs. With various governmental and non-governmental initiatives, it is for sure that EWRs in PRIs would contribute their best in achieving national goals of Samridha Bharat (prosperous India) and Sashakta Bharat (empowered India) and the seventeen global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to which India is committed.

[Note: Views expressed in this article are author's own and does not represent his present or previous employers]

References:

- 1 Rajput P (2001), Women's Political Participation in India: An Agenda for Empowerment, in Promilla Kapur "Empowering the Indian Women" Publications Division, Government of India, New Delhi, pp. 226-227
- 2 High Level Committee on Status of Women (2015), Report on the Status of Women in India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India, New Delhi. P.34
- 3 Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2010), Study on EWRs in Panchayati Raj Institutions, Govt. of India, New Delhi. P.4
- 4 Ministry of Panchayati Raj, accessed from <http://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/10198/1791196/States%20having%20provision%20of%2050%25%20reservation%20for%20women%20in%20PRIs.pdf> on
- 5 Pattanaik S.K. (2010), Rural Women Panchayati Raj and Development, Arise Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, pp. 130- 131
- 6 <https://www.firstpost.com/india/international-womens-day-2017-60-percent-of-female-panchayat-leaders-in-tamil-nadu-work-without-male-interference-3321464.html> accessed on 05.06.2018
- 7 Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2014), National Capability Building Framework, Govt. of India, New Delhi.
- 8 Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2016), Advisory on Panchayat Self-Help Groups Convergence at Gram Panchayat Level, Govt. of India, accessed from <http://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/10198/1389387/PRI-SHG%20convergence.pdf> on 07.06.2018
- 9 Ministry of Rural Development (2018), Advisory on Panchayat Self-Help Groups Convergence at Gram Panchayat Level, Govt. of India, accessed on <http://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/10198/456811/D.O.%20letter%20Secy%28RD%29%20dtd%2022.05.2018.pdf> on 07.06.2018
- 10 Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2015), Letter to Celebrate International Women's Day, accessed on <http://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/10198/355951/Womens%20Day%20celebration11.pdf> on 07.06.2018

(The author is Assistant Professor, National Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj, Rajendranagar, Hyderabad.
Email: rajeshksinha.nird@gov.in)