



Women's Capacity Building at Grassroots Level in Bihar: A Study of Reservation Policy

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Abstract: Empowering women has remained a great concern since long. All over the world, mostly in India, women continue to be seen as a patch, a stepney behind men, having less power and voice to take decision affecting their own life, property, society, community or country. Women's unequal relationship and low status is closely linked with the lack of their political participation in decision making and governance. The extent of this participation is a measure of empowerment. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment Acts have come to the rescue of Indian women by providing one-third representation to them in Panchayati Raj institutions. Successful democracy requires full involvement of women in political process who constitute almost 50 per cent of the total population and it has to be followed by an effective implementation. Following the 73rd constitutional amendment Act, Bihar legislature also enacted Panchayati Raj Act of 1993 and consequently after 22 years, Panchayati elections were held in 2001. Later in 2005, Bihar became the first state to give 50 per cent reservation to women in local self- governments. With the compulsory reservation of 50 per cent of seats for women in PRIs, the formal participatory aspect of democracy has been fulfilled. But question may still be raised as to whether this participation is really meaningful to the concerned women or the elected women representatives are dependent and incapable of using their decision-making power. The main objective of this research work is to assess the ground reality and effectiveness of reservation for women in panchayats, at the grassroots level.

Keywords: panchayats, empowerment, reservation, democracy, etc.

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Introduction :

High level of political participation of men and women can be regarded as one of the pillars of successful democracy. But political under-representation of women has emerged as one of the key concerns of women movements in the recent years. Recent developments in feminist politics in India not only indicate growing concern with under-representation of women in elected and decision-making bodies, but also with arguments for some form of reservation or affirmative action to redress existing gender imbalances. [Rai,2009:201] Women's political participation will also enhance their ability in struggling for their rights and challenging the ideologies and hierarchies that keep women in a subordinate position. But a number of studies on political participation have indicated that women in general are less participative in politics than men. As a social group, women still possess fewer political resources than men. [Sarkar,2010:194]. They have to be engaged in constant battles against a number of social, economic and political hurdles. Taking the right initiative to improve the status of women in India, the Government of India passed a piece of progressive legislation in 1993 through 73rd constitutional amendment to enable the presence of critical mass of women in the decentralised decision-making process. Bihar took a further progressive step by reserving 50 per cent of total seats in the PRIs for women both at the functionaries and membership level. The subsequent PRI elections served as a breakthrough by enabling the entry of a large number of women in local self-government. Reservation came to be perceived as a powerful tool for the political empowerment of women and for eliminating inequality

and discrimination in the political sphere. In the prevailing political scenario, women's voluntary political participation was found to be beyond imagination. So only reservation appeared to be a plausible mechanism to bring women into decision-making process of the government.

The fundamental issue that this paper seeks to address is that how the women in Bihar respond to this affirmative action of the government. A very significant point to consider in answering this question is the inherent male biases of the social organizations in the patriarchal society of India. The post-reservation picture in Bihar is not very encouraging and noteworthy. The common perception in fact is that majority of elected women representatives are readymade leaders by virtue of being wives, daughters and sisters of powerful influential men. [Roy & Kumar, 2001:] On their behalf, meetings are attended and decisions are taken by their male counterparts. They are called proxy women and their husbands Mukhiyapatis or Sarpanchpatis. So, reservations for women are not accompanied by improvements of the vulnerable groups within the villages and this shows the intactness of male biases and patriarchal values. But there are women representatives who have shown greater efficiency and transparency in running the public affairs in panchayats. [Mathew: 2003] They rather exhibit their independent leadership. [Singha: 2001] However there is a growing tendency among women representatives, especially educated ones, to transform themselves into politically empowered people. It can be hopefully asserted that women's numerical presence in PRIs will make these structures more receptive to women's needs and concerns. Gradually women would move, as it is hoped, from a position of silence to gaining voice. Undoubtedly, the social agenda hidden in the demand for political representation of women and the larger struggle for political opportunities continue to pose challenge to the institutions of democracy. [Sharma: 1999]

Objectives:

The main objective of this paper is to find answers to some pertinent questions and queries as regarding women's involvement in PRIs like-

- (1) Whether elected women would have greater access and control over materials, finance and other resources?
- (2) Whether other partners including family or husband are facilitating or hindering their active involvement in PRIs?

- (3) Whether they are capable of taking decisions, using power in the finalization of development plans and proposals?
- (4) Whether this participation has anything to do with women's empowerment in the truest sense of the term?
- (5) What strategies can build capacity of women representatives?

Methodology:

The methodology adopted for this research work was content analysis. In this content analysis, different types of texts have been used like written text, such as books and papers and hypertext like texts found on the internet.

Conceptual Framework:

Women empowerment is itself linked with women's participation in decision-making process and governance.

Political participation and women empowerment: The need for the presence and participation of women in the political process has been keenly felt in recent years. Such a participation, it is strongly believed is a pre-requisite for not merely women's access to equality and rights for their own advancement and that of society, but also for good governance. The basic philosophy behind Panchayati Raj institutions was to ensure people participation. [Fadia, 2003: 738] Noble laureate Dr. Amartya Sen also emphasizes, "Indeed the empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development for many countries in the world." [Sen, 1999: 202] But in a society like Bihar which is mainly caste-ridden and conservative in outlook, the process of women's political participation is hard though a crucial task. Women in Bihar are found to be apathetic and indifferent to the political process. Their poor access to politics is reflected in their nominal presence in Parliament and legislative assemblies. This low presence of women in political process which can be attributed to conservative patriarchal structure, illiteracy, lack of family support, criminalization of politics, reluctance of political parties to field women candidates, etc., poses a serious problem for Indian democracy. No doubt, the affirmative action of the government in PRIs has resulted in a sharp rise in the number of elected women representatives, yet, due to some or other reasons they neither seem to be actively and genuinely involved in decision-making nor have they been effective in asserting their rights. The main concern of this article is to examine the ground reality of women reservation in PRIs.

Reservation as a tool for women's capacity building at the grassroots level: Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. But women in Bihar are virtually invisible in the political sphere. Rather the society in Bihar is not ripe for the voluntary participation of women in the political process. To achieve the goal of equal and enhanced participation of women, the mechanism of reservation has been formulated. It is at the grassroots level that women should participate more because the decisions of local government have profound effect on the problems that concern women and here reservation seems to be a powerful tool for women's capacity building at the grassroots level. Reservation is not an end in itself, it requires a conducive environment to flourish. Bihar, a semi feudal agrarian society, fails to provide fertile ground for it. Therefore, the main concern is to de-socialise the patriarchal norms which are indoctrinated by women since ages. Capacity-building is not only based on outer environment, it considerably depends on inherent awareness and an urge to change the social order. It is imperative therefore to socialise women from childhood and develop their critical thinking in power sharing zone.

Discussions and Findings :

Since the introduction of reservation, both intensive and extensive experimentations have been made at the grassroots level by the state governments. The foremost impact has been in the form of widened and strengthened base of participatory democracy due to the increased representation of women in the panchayat bodies. Because of reservation, a large number of women have been elected particularly from the lower socio-economic status. The entry of women to the panchayats can be described as a silent revolution which is slowly influencing the economic, social and political lives of village women. But in many cases, these women representatives are regarded as proxy and namesake members for their less participation in panchayat activities. It is generally found that many of the women are elected because of the status of their male relatives and that's why such women function as proxies for their male relatives. Also, in some cases, it is noticed that the husbands had been panchayat representatives earlier and when the seats were reserved for women, the husbands put their efforts and got their wives elected. [Roy,2011:129] Since many of the women representatives are first timers and on several occasions illiterate, they depend on their men folk for conducting panchayat activities. Sometimes

these male members claim to shield them from being exploited or harassed by the officials or from being falsely implicated. Even if they depend on their husbands, the power relationship between husband and wife has changed because of reservations, particularly because the husband gets a chance to come to the public forum because of his wife and in this process the character of patriarchy gets depleted. Now the husband and his family members generally support her in domestic chores and her bargaining power at domestic front has improved reasonably. Moreover, the proxy women syndrome can be seen only in initial few years of her tenure as gradually they may become independent, decisive and vocal. It is generally observed that women representatives give more priority to such programmes which are need-based and sustainable. They are also compelled by neighbouring women to implement the schemes meant for them. Contrary to the popular criticism, the standard of political institutions at the grassroots level has not been lowered as a result of women's participation. Rather the development schemes are effectively executed and percolated at the grassroots level. Women's less effective performance and inability to wield power has come under a lot of criticism. But these negative reactions overlook the fact that male leaders from the grassroots have also had similar limitations and more so time has proved it wrong and biased.

The involvement of women at the grassroots politics has undoubtedly expanded the horizon and accelerated social mobilisation both at the public space because of their attending public meetings and interacting with government officials, as well as at the private space for their working relation has changed as the area of cooperation increases at the family level also. Their self- perception has also changed and now they look after their health and education of their family. Their social status has unquestionably uplifted.

This paper aims at finding answer to the very relevant question is whether or not reservation for women in panchayats is working at the grassroots level in Bihar. Studies conducted in this regard reveal the fact that men still call the shots in panchayats despite reservation of seats for women in Bihar. [Malhotra:2014] Women Mukhiyas, Sarpanches, and Pramukhs in Bihar find themselves in a very peculiar position. Most of these women are mere rubber stamps for the men in their house, who can be the husband, father or son running the show. Not just the villagers but the block officials are also accustomed to interacting with the male members who have all the information and actually only they

actually take the decisions in planning and implementation of schemes. Even the contact numbers mentioned in the list are of male members and the women representatives are hardly seen in public meetings. The Bihar government is aware of this harsh reality. This is indeed a structural problem and the root causes are illiteracy, lack of confidence and training of these women representatives and that's why they have no option but to take assistance from family members upon whom they can trust. In most cases, these women representatives do not even come out of their houses to campaign during elections. Women mukhiyas and pramukhs in most cases even do not know where the papers are filed and what documents are required. So, the issue of women's political empowerment is questionable. She has instead empowered her husband or son and her duty is confined to serve tea to the people coming to meet her husband. The lady is just used as a pawn to fulfil the ambition of the family or the husband. Since the elected women representatives (EWRs) do not perform any duty and all dealings are done by husbands or sons, corruption has escalated as the block officials by obliging the family members by interacting with them take bigger cuts from them. Clearly most EWRs in Bihar are staying at homes and functioning as mere figureheads. In many cases these women representatives have little or no knowledge about local governance issues. They simply put their signatures or thumb impressions on documents. Madhu Kishwar argues that the present scheme of reservation will 'ghettoize' women politics confining them to contesting only reserved constituencies. [Kapur, 2001: 231] There is also the prevalent fear that reservation for women may go the way of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes reservation and benefit only the elite class women and have no effect on the patriarchal structure. [Sharma: 2001]

The corruption prevalent in the implementation of welfare schemes sometimes have put these women in a very difficult position. They seek to curb corruption but fail in mitigating them, because of the racket working from top to the bottom levels. In corruption charges, FIRs and complaints are lodged against women who are official signatories, but the real culprits are the men who escape the punishment. This way the conservative social set-up is making it more difficult for women's reservation policy to work effectively.

Whether reservation has actually empowered women at the grassroots in Bihar is therefore debatable. Nevertheless, after the introduction of reservation, Bihar

has witnessed almost 10% increase in voting behaviour in 2009 parliamentary elections on account of rise in number of women voters. For the first time, women got some social recognition. The very fact that the men of the house are getting papers signed by them and they are getting some importance in the social space is significant. Moreover, in many cases, educated and confident EWRs are trying to move from position of silence to gaining some voice and emerging as conscious and active agents in the political process and reducing several negative myths related to rural women in Bihar. Therefore, generalisation about women representatives in Bihar needs to be avoided. Being judgmental can further create hindrances on the path of women empowerment. Much harm has already been done and any further possibility must be ruled out.

The rosy picture regarding women's political participation at the grassroots level is not without some constraints. Indian culture and its institutions are still predominantly patriarchal. The elected women representatives, especially in Bihar, are subjected to the restrictions of caste, class and patriarchal values. The culture of continued subordination has made many women representatives under-confident to exercise their public responsibility due to the fear of being ridiculed and side-lined. They are not taken seriously by their male colleagues and bureaucrats. In Bihar one cannot deny the notion of 'proxy women' as their husbands taking advantage of their ignorance, work on their behalf without giving them any space. Violence against women representatives has also increased considerably. These women remain on the periphery as they lack political skills or experiences. They generally do not attend panchayat meetings regularly and those who attend do not want to participate in deliberations. Women in panchayats also have to consider the impact of their outside interactions on their marriage. Women usually do not aspire to get empowered at the cost of their marriage and family life. Sometimes the politician husbands, initially promoting their wives to avail the benefits of affirmative policy of the government and enter PRIs, later become their biggest opponents when they find their better halves confident and decisive. This aspect of conflict is generally not faced by male politicians. This type of conflict is generally found with comparatively more educated and economically better-off representatives. But among the socially, economically and educationally weaker sections there is found to be more sharing and support on the part of husbands and in-laws. This indicates that reservation by

itself does not serve the purpose. Unless reservations are accompanied by female literacy, independent voting rights and the consequent change in the women's status in society, women will continue to act as mere puppet representatives at the hands of the male members of their household. [Pai:1998]

Nevertheless, the presence of a large number of women in local-self-governments has resulted in effective social mobilisation and created conditions for building social capital, which hopefully will have big potential in future for the success of democracy. Hopefully there are still several instances of positive and self-empowered role played by EWRs in Bihar. It has been found that in general whenever women's participation has been good, greater interest in matters of more immediate local concerns like drinking water, health, and schools has resulted. Civil society organizations have also made a lot of contributions in this regard.

Recommendations and Conclusion:

Reservation alone can't change the status of women in Bihar. It requires acceptance by society as a whole. [Roy,2011:131] The purpose of women reservation in the grassroots institutions will be achieved only when a conducive atmosphere is created. The state government is required to formulate and seriously implement comprehensive training programmes to train the representatives of PRIs. There should also be pragmatic refresher courses for them. Timely interventions by NGO's to generate awareness must be encouraged by the government. Gender sensitization training should be provided on a large scale to both men and women. In general men are not targeted in this intervention and this is a serious gap which needs to be addressed. For this purpose, sensitization programmes for male members in the family and male functionaries at the village level should be organized on a regular basis. Attending meetings by the EWRs should be made mandatory. They should be provided with free legal assistance. Psychological empowerment i.e. realising their worth and imbibing confidence is a pre-requisite for political empowerment. Literacy programmes should be regularly organised for illiterate panchayat members. Women representatives should be rewarded for their outstanding performances. Above all, a positive change in the mindset of people is also imperative.

The political space is highly contested and men, the current stakeholders, may not easily accept the shift in power equations. This is the beginning of a long process and therefore collective action is necessary to

quicken the process further. [Baghel,2009:293] Women rising above caste, religion and class bias should form their associations to act as pressure groups at different levels. Only through capacity building programmes women empowerment at panchayati levels can be visualised. Orientation programmes at regular intervals must be incorporated. The module must be well prepared and updated with the help of economists, educationists, and policy makers. Training of trainers, orientation workshops, refresher workshops, exposure visits, interface meetings between EWRs and community, organising Nukkad nataks illustrating the functioning of PRIs, experience sharing of EWRs, wider publicity to success stories can be major capacity building initiatives. Mass awareness campaigns should be undertaken through print media, posters, rallies, street plays and village meetings.

A greater partnership between the government, the stakeholders and NGOs can make an effective intervention in the political empowerment of women. There should also be a linkage between self-help groups, women's groups and EWRs. These networks will help women gain collective strength and solidarity. They will provide platforms to share experiences and build confidence. Groups of young boys and girls from different schools should form a social network with the purpose of motivating and encouraging the elected representatives. This will help them in their own gender sensitization and political education. These capacities building exercises and strengthening of women's networks can be very useful in the transformation of EWRs from passive non-participant members to confident, active and responsible members of the PRIs. The solidarity established through these networks and forums will empower the women to fight injustices meted out to them. They can also monitor execution of welfare schemes. The capacity building of EWRs should be a continuous process, requiring regular inputs, constant monitoring and follow-ups.

About one and a half decades of women reservation in PRIs is a very short period to make a marked shift in the dominant patriarchal structure of Bihar. But it can be very well asserted that now women's public role is changing and, men who did not want to share the political power, exclusively held by them, with women are also gradually, though sometimes reluctantly, conceding to this change. One needs to believe that these small initiatives are giant steps having huge potential in future.

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