

WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Evidently, there is enough reasonable backing to support the claim that women have capabilities, which can be employed to meaningfully enhance economic, social and most importantly the political development of nations. Civil and women's groups have identified that women's political participation is lacking and have made conscious efforts to address the issue, while such efforts have generated, in certain instances, positive outcomes, there is still much to be done to ensure that women are recognized in the political dispensation of our country. In this paper I have discussed about the Women in Governance and Development.

KEYWORDS: *Women in Governance & Development, Political Dispensation, Women's Political Participation.*

Introduction

A democratic Polity involves the principle of decentralization of power in a way that the affairs of the local people are managed by means of their positive participation. It implies the extension of democracy at the grass-roots level in view of the fact that the people's participation signifies the constitution of a democratic government not only at the top but also at the foundation level of the political system. Thus, democratic decentralization or Panchayati Raj aims at making democracy real by bringing the millions to the functioning of their representative government at the lowest level. The philosophy of Panchayati Raj is deeply rooted in the tradition and culture of rural India and is by no means a new concept. The intention behind the concept is to involve the public in local planning, identification of beneficiaries, decision-making and proper implementation of policies and programmes of the people as desired by them:

- Panchayati Raj, as a system of governance, has had its ebb and flow in the Indian Polity ever since India got its independence. Various committees headed by Balwant Rai Mehta, Ashok Mehta, V.P. Naik, P.B. Patil, G.V.R. Rao, L.N. Singhvi overhauled these institutions which gave necessary impetus to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.
- The Panchayati Raj, and enigmatic and elusive concept, has undergone topsy-turvy changes in its role, shape, and function after the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act 1992 which came into effect from April 24, 1993.
- With the passage of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, now India is at a crucial juncture with the evolution of PRIS- the Indian brand of rural local self government. It has envisioned people's participation in the process of planning, decision making, implementation and delivery system. Gender equality and gender equity are emerging as major challenges in the global development debate. Sociologists and development activities are giving prime importance to these areas in their agenda for research and development,
- As Nobel Prize winner, famous economist Amartya Sen has pointed out "Democracy is not the only goal of development, it is the primary means of development"

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- Women's participation in political processes is imperfect in strengthening democracy for their struggle against marginalization, trivialization and oppression. Emergence of women as a strong group would change the prevailing political practices, the nature and content of debates in the legislature and women's issues can be taken care of, from the feminist perspective both in policy formulation and implementation. Women, Governance and development are the major subjects for debate and discussion among academics and policy-makers all over the world at present. Debate and discussion have further deepened after grass-roots institutions were created through the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India for governance and development. Ever since the passage of the Amendment bill in the Indian Parliament, a major question has been raised in every forum as to what extent the elected women Representatives have changed the agenda of governance and the process of development.

Seven decades of struggle by the women groups at the national level have brought the subject of women to the forefront for discussion, deliberation and to the level of policy intervention. As a result of all these activities a series of legislations have been enacted to free the women from the existing clutches' of backwardness. Yet the conditions have not radically changed. Women are evolving themselves in the context of globalization and governance to achieve sustainable development. In looking at the issues of women, perspectives vary from school to school. Micro and macro movements are going on everywhere for addressing the issues of women from different perspectives. As a result, a space has been reserved for women in the orbit of governance legitimately in India by which women have come to power at the grass roots to perform critical functions. As an exclusive space has been created for women at the grass roots they have to work with the community. How these women perceive their role and perform their responsibilities is a matter of deep concern for everyone. One school of thought emphasises the fact that it is a political space & acts accordingly. The women are elected to panchayats to represent the problems of the women. But they are not the representations of women alone. They are the representatives of the society at large. There is yet another view that the government at the Centre and the governments of the provinces have not considered many of the development and gender issues for governance. As a result many of the development issues have been totally relegated to the background at the grass roots.

Against this background the women leaders have to consider this space as development space. Without moving to the political frontiers more, the women have to continue their activities in the development domain. It is in such a context of conflicting perceptions that they have to perform their role and responsibilities. Opportunities to exercise their will and vision are more. At the same time possibilities of confrontation are also more as they have to work with and within the community.

Leaders's Perception

The elected women representatives who have occupied positions in the Panchayati Raj system perceive that Panchayati Raj institutions are to provide services to the people to the level of the satisfaction of the communities. Their entry into the political domain was sudden and their activities were run by many in the background as they would not do anything on their own. They never dream of such positions in their whole life. The elected women representatives were totally directed by the male family members while discharging their duties & responsibilities. But there is a small segment of elected women representatives who have come from SHGS and Political Parties as official candidates who have taken up the responsibilities on their own. There is yet another section gaining spirit to act independently after attending and participating in the training and orientation programmes that have enhanced their skill and capabilities. Hence the elected women representatives have a perception that the Panchayat institutions have to attend to the needs of the people. Yet a small section of the representatives have focussed their attention on development, more particularly, on social development. They are the opinion-makers now in the Panchayat System. Development is yet another concept subjected to scrutiny in the context of overexploitation of the natural resources and destruction of the ecological balance of nature. Internalising the concept of development has changed the life style of the people. Producing more, consuming more, and market-oriented activities have caused severe damage to the livelihood and security of the people. Enabling the rich to become richer and allowing the poor to be marginalized has created a wide division between the rich and the poor. The growing pace of development causes intense social conflict and thereby putting peace and equity in danger. To overcome the obstacles and barriers created by the development activities a new concept has evolved. Sustainable development which provides security to the poor, protects nature, maintains balance in ecology, provides for the needs of the individuals and communities. Thus the concept of development has been redefined and it enables the communities to maintain their cultural heritage.

Basic Assumptions on Women's Governance

Before evaluating the performance of the elected women representatives it is necessary to examine the postulates evolved over a period of time on the basis of the experience in the world of women's way of governing. There are several assumption of this study and a few are considered vital and relevant to the Indian context.

- **First:** Women would bring a different approach to governance. It is a strong notion among the development organizations and women activities groups which have got rich experience with women, that women would bring in new ideas, energy, enthusiasm and approach to governance and that hitherto unutilized potentials would be used. It is expected that women's participation will transform the quality of the political life and the agenda of emancipation. There is yet another view that women leaders come to power with several inherent barriers and weakness and as a result they follow men as role models and lose themselves.
- **Second:** Women would perceive the concept of development as sustainable development. Their concentration is more on natural resources management. Women believe and perceive that service providing institutions, whether they are schools or primary health centres or a public distribution system shops, should be closer to them as they would reduce their hardship and save time. Further, they consider that removal of child labour, alcoholism and violence and lessening of competition are part of governance and development.
- **Third:** The EWRS (Elected Women Representatives) will play an important role in pushing the women's issues forward for public discussion and decision-making. It is very important to mention here the view that women have been oriented to think like men since patriarchy is strongly entrenched in the family and the social system. However, they have their own distinctive thought process. But there is no space for it in the public forums. On certain issues EWRs show greater concern in the decision-making process. It is true that they are not in one group. They have their own affiliations. In order to bring the women's issues to the public they need a support structure. They establish links with SHGS and through them the issues of women are discussed. They are also divided along caste, class and religious lines. Yet they show their distinctiveness in the process of governance.
- **Fourth:** The EWRS ensure more participation of the people in the process of development and governance. Women leaders at the grass roots level in the Indian context always maintain simplicity, transparency and accountability. They further demonstrate that they maintain their closeness and contact with the clients and the people.
- **Fifth:** The EWRS have different sets of skills and they enrich the leadership qualities of the leaders. Women have developed skills to carry out various pieces of work despite the limited resources and differences of opinion with the family members. Working in adverse circumstances is not new to them. Further, they possess patience to listen to other which men do not have. On many occasions elected women representatives are honest and accurate in presenting issues to the decision-making authorities.
- **Sixth:** EWRS are the pathfinders in attaching importance to social issues. They assume powers to perform certain roles and responsibilities. Women leaders who have a service orientation in their attitudes and behaviour, assume responsibilities and carry out remarkable responsibilities in the society and they become role models for others.
- **Seventh:** The EWRS tend to maintain secular values in dealing with matters of governance. They never wish to make room for discriminatory practices in the society based on caste and religion after having the orientation training in managing schools such as agriculture, water management, fuel and fodder, poverty alleviation programmes, education, health, family welfare, child development, public distribution and social welfare: the leaders concentrate on development and on the segment of people who are left out in the process of development.
- **Eighth:** EWRS are less corrupt as per gender ideology. Women are always honest, pure, simple and incorruptible. Corruption is always in the public domain and not in the private domain. All public systems are corrupt and whoever comes to the system will be afflicted by the malady of the system. Since women are at the tail end of the public system and also with the community they tend to keep up the image which they have acquired in the family system and community. They want to maintain the image of the mother and the sister. In this way they want to enjoy the response of the people. In order to fulfil their goal sometimes they sacrifice their life and family. They are always ready to learn. They enjoy learning and listening. Their concentration and achievement are always at an appreciable level.

The women develop the argument that if Panchayats are considered a service delivery mechanism, the whole system can be handed over to the women and everyone can then realise the power of women leaders. The performance of women leaders has attracted the attention of the public. Leaders have to enable the public for participation. Therefore the public have an interest in attending the Gramsabha meetings as their views are properly considered. Now-a-days a Gramsabha can connect itself immediately with the Lok Sabha. Really women exhibit extraordinary skill in managing the Panchayats. Even in adverse circumstances they tend to work and produce splendid results. It is totally wrong that women act only from commonsense and not on the basis of data and facts. The writer herself observed many times that before going to any office women prepare themselves well, finish their home work perfectly with all necessary facts. They are above communal perceptions. They perceive that conflict cannot bring about prosperity and development. So they concentrate on communal harmony. They never entertain conflict among caste groups and religious groups. They always work towards harmony.

Conclusion

From the above narration, it is proved and observed that women leaders have joined together to promote the best practice in governance and development activities and are committed to transform the entire scenario and establish milestones through good governance. A variety of support structures have to extend support to the EWRs to continue their struggle to achieve efficiency in performing their duties and responsibilities. The EWRs face several challenges and sometimes they encounter very difficult and embarrassing circumstances and have to sacrifice their happiness, their comforts and even their life and dignity for the sake of society. Yet in the context of public good they assume several social responsibilities very effectively to the satisfaction of the community.

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