

# Impact Of Panchayati Raj Institutions In Women Empowerment In Bihar

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*Abstract: In the present study an attempt has been made to assess the impact of bottom up planning under PRIs and Women participation therein in the State of Bihar. The study also attempts to probe the process of empowerment of elected scheduled caste/ tribe representatives both men and women, in Bihar. Social profile of the respondents, role played by them in the running of Gram Panchayats has also been examined in the study. The study covers various aspects of PRIs such as "Salient features of constitutional amendment, powers, reservations and role of Functions of Panchayats in bottom up planning, Status of Gram Sabha Provisions, status of District Rural Development Agencies, Women and Panchayats and existing Legislations and laws for women, Institutional mechanism and constraints particularly Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe women in participation in decision making. Socio Political Empowerment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribe women through Panchayati Raj, Social Exclusion of SCs Cultural and Political Assertion of SCs in PRIs, Economic Conditions, Role of traditional Panchayats, Role of Major Political Parties in mainstreaming SCs participation in Panchayats as also impacting the scheduled castes and the scheduled Tribes Act, 1989. Finally an effort has been made to suggest suitable steps required to be taken to deal with the most coming restraints notice in the functioning of PRIs.*

**Keywords: Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Socio Political Empowerment, Reservation**

Empowerment is a multidimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is the capacity to implement) in people for use in their own lives, their own communities and in their own society, by acting on issues that they describe as important. Above all, empowerment is a result of participation in decision-making.

Thenceforth, women's empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate in the development process of the society through the political institutions as a partner with human dignity. So, why is empowerment through Panchayati Raj? According to the Document on women's Development (1985) women's role in the political process has virtually remained unchanged since independence. Broad-based political participation of women has been severely limited due to various traditional factors such as caste, religion, feudal attitude and family status. As a result, women have been left on the periphery of political life.

Observing this dark picture, 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) came to provide them an opportunity to ventilate their grievances and to take active part in decision-making process in the local level.

Empowerment literally means to 'enable'. The empowerment is social, political process and its critical operating element is power. It has potential to closely engage and confront the prevailing socio cultural context as it entails shift in political, social and economic power between and across both individuals and groups. The notion of empowerment involves social transformation and economic development. The women empowerment involves in it skill formation so as to enhance social and economic capacity within women. Whenever discussion on women empowerment arises it always pays attention on women's role as a decision maker, they being economically self-reliance and having protection against all discrimination. Panchayati Raj Institution provides closest democratic experience to people in

rural areas. So, it cannot achieve their goal without meaningful participation of women in functioning of these institutions. The Problem and Prospects of Women in the changing Social and Political system is the need of today's system. Because women consist of 48.9 per cent of the population and after all governmental and non-governmental efforts their position is not improving equally to men. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) opened a vast opportunity for the development and progress of women. Women Participation in various aspects of life including politics both as a citizen as well as decision makers is very low. So seeking political post at gross root level was therefore considered as a first steps towards women empowerment. Our experiment of women empowerment in the last 20 years in the rural areas displays diverse patterns across different states of the country within the same constitutional framework. The two core components of the empowerment capacity building and control have the potential to transform women from the 'object of development' to the decision agent of government. As per provisions contained in article 243 (d) of the Constitution. One-third of the seats of Panchayati Raj Institutions and one-third offices of the Chairperson at all level of Panchayati Raj Institutions covered by part IXth of the Constitution are reserved for women among members and Sarpanches: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tripura and Utrakhand.

The state of Bihar has been lagging behind in all respects in the country except that of the population growth rate which is highest contributed by the state. It is the highest migrating state in the country. The state witnessed approximately 47% out of state migration in the country. It is one of the lowest urbanized states in the country, where 88% persons still live in rural areas. This indicates lowest division of labor and specialization of job. Agriculture is the main occupation, which encourage the radical caste system to survive and untouchability and other social evils to exist untouched. Caste struggle and mass massacres have given new fame to the state. The unchanging environment of the social institutions and social relations has put the state on the back step.

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High rate of out of migration rightly predicts the inter-state disparity and rigidity of the social and economic system of the state. The rigidity of the social system is of course the incompatibility to the expectations of the vast populations of women at one end and compatibility of other state's system to accommodate them on the other end has put the masses in unrest. Therefore, there is already a process of changes in women in progress. However, the extent of change in the local structure of social institutions is depicts. Recently high economic growth by the huge budgetary allocation for women empowerment has become a key point of discussion for its translation into high employment opportunities out of the local habitation and effect on the local social institutions However, the changes may be slow and unexpected. Behavioral structure largely may not exclusively agree with such changes in the desired direction of structural changes in such institutions. Post modernism and humane democracy ultimately pose to human liberty and freedom of choices, which could only be attained by structural changes in social institutions of interactions. Therefore, the referential changes of greater human freedom and choices can only lead the empowerment of sublimated society. Panchayati Raj Institutions plays very important role for women empowerment in this process, which would ultimately help planners and researchers in bringing about fast and catalytic changes in the state of Bihar.

Bihar is the first state to implement 50per cent reservation in Panchayati Raj Institution. As per the Act of 2006 women came to the Mukhiya level at 44.7percent to the highest 48.8per cent for Zila Parishad member. The average percentage of elected women representatives came up to 47per cent. Reservation is related at the time of Panchayat election that is every five years.

'Panchayat' literally means assembly (ayat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community. Panchayati Raj is a system of governance in which Gram panchayats acts as a major unit of administration. It has three levels namely-Village, Block and District. Gandhiji believed that democratic freedoms have to be founded in institutions of self government in every village in India. He drew his inspiration from the traditional Panchayats; 'village republics', which he called Panchayati Raj. He based his vision of contemporary democracy in independent India on genuine peoples' participation in the development and welfare of their own habitats through elected Panchayats. DrBhimraoAmbedkar, the father of our Constitution, provided for Village Panchayats in the State List of the Seventh Schedule, but consistently stressed the need to incorporate reservations for the depressed segments of our society in the structure of Panchayati Raj. The Constitution of India promulgated in January 1950 includes a provision relating to Panchayats system. By 1951-52 there were over 70,000 Village Panchayat functioning in country. Part IX of the constitution includes three-tier system of Panchayats which constitutes-The Village Level, Block level and District Panchayat. The Intermediate Panchayats exists in the states

where the population is above 20 lakhs. Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) which is deals in Article 40, Section 4th of Indian Constitution says that-The states should take steps to organize Village Panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. Rajiv Gandhi ensured this and added reservations for women of all said categories in Panchayats. His declared objective was '*Power to the People*' through the Panchayats, thus making India not only the world's biggest democracy, but also the world's most representative democracy.

The philosophy of Panchayat Raj is deeply steeped in tradition and culture of rural India and is by no means a new concept. Panchayati Raj genesis can be seen in ancient period in texts of Panini, Buddhist text and Rig Veda in respect to administration autonomy. There we get a reference of Gram Sanghs or rural communities. In Manusmiriti and Mahabharat we get even in Kautilya's "Arthshastra" talk about officials which constitute a group of Village Republics. During Mauryan period, Gupta period and Sultanate period Panchayats were organized and had performed function of sanitation, education and judiciary etc. The Britishers had created local self government, as early as 1687 the Municipal corporation of Madras was formed. Then in 1870 a resolution for decentralization of power was passed by Bengal Chowkidari Act 1870. It was the first step towards local self government. In 1909 "*Royal Commission of Decentralization*" submitted report to constitute and develop Village Panchayat for the administration of local village affair. The government of India Act of 1935 also had provision for provincial autonomy and had strengthened Panchayats in the country. The provisions remained till the passing of the Act of 1947 and India attaining independence. In 1952, Government of India made first systematic effort to bring rural development through Community Development Program with the first Five Year Plan. The story of Panchayati Raj has been a story of ups and downs. It seems to have passed through four distinct phases in its short span of life. The structure of Panchayati Raj Institutions in India varied from state to state. India's experiment with democratic decentralization started in Rajasthan on Oct2, 1959 at Naggaur District. After this many committees were formed to strengthen and review the functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions at gross roots level of democracy. Now, Panchayati Raj system exists in all states except Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Delhi. The Government Act of 1935, Malaviya Committee(1956), Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957), Ashok Mehta Committee(1978), GVK Rao Committee (1985), Singhvi Committee(1986) etc have dealt with development, functioning autonomy and freedom, weakness and remedial measures for strengthening of Panchayati Raj system. Panchayati Raj Provided a system of self-governance at the village level, however, it did not have a constitutional status. The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992 provides a framework on which to build the third level of governance Panchayats.

Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation once stated, "Independence must begin at the bottom ... it follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs..." April 23, 1993 is a

landmark day in the history of Panchayati Raj in India as on this day, the institution of Panchayati Raj was accorded constitutional status through the Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992, thereby seeking to transform Mahatma Gandhi's dream of Gram Swaraj into reality.

The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 mandates provisions for- Establishment of a three-tier structure (Village Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti or Intermediate. Level Panchayat and Zilla Parishad or district level Panchayat). Establishment of Gram Sabha at the village level. Regular elections to Panchayats every five years. Proportionate seat reservation for SCs/STs. Reservation of not less than 1/3 seats for women. Constitution of State Finance Commissions to recommend measures to improve the finances of Panchayats Constitution of state election commission.

The constitution (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act, 1992 vests power in the State Government to endow Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self government such as:

Preparation of plans and their execution for economic development and social justice in relation to 29 subjects listed in the XI schedule of the Constitution. Authority to Panchayat to levy, collect and appropriate taxes, duties, tolls and fees. Transfer of taxes, duties, tolls and fees collected by the States to Panchayats. Gram Sabha:

"*Gram Sabha*" is a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls of a village or a group of villages which elect a Panchayat. A vibrant and enlightened Gram Sabha is central to the success of the Panchayati Raj system. The year 1999-2000 has thus been declared as the "*Year of the Gram Sabha*". State Governments have been urged:

To vest in the Gram Sabha, powers on the lines envisaged in the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) ESA Act, 1996. To make a mandatory provision in the Panchayati Raj Act for holding Gram Sabha meetings throughout the country on the occasion of the Republic Day, Labour Day, Independence Day and Gandhi Jayanti. To make a mandatory provision in the Panchayati Raj Act specifying separately, the quorum for Gram Sabha meeting for ordinary meetings, meetings convened for special purposes and reconvened meetings due to cancellation of an earlier meeting for want of quorum. To make members of the Gram Sabha aware of their powers and responsibilities with a view to ensuring mass participation, particularly of the hitherto marginalized, groups, such as women and SCs/STs. To lay down procedures for the Gram Sabha to effectively carry out social audit of beneficiary oriented development programmes of the Ministry of Rural Development, particularly the legal powers of the Gram Sabha to order recovery or punishment for financial mismanagement. To evolve a plan of action for generating wide publicity for Gram Sabha meetings. To evolve guidelines/procedure for holding Gram Sabha meetings and a model list of business for such meetings. To generate awareness as to the rights of the Gram Sabha with respect to control over natural resources, land records and conflict resolution.

O.P. Bohara (1997) states that, 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment act, mainly aimed at decentralizing the power and also removing the gender imbalances and bias in the institutions of local self government. He justifies the rationale to provide reservation

for following reasons, what is the actual intention of our policy makers. 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendments actually aims for (1) shared perception of justice, deprivation and oppression. (2) Shared experience of marginalization vis-à-vis power structure. (3) Collective empowerment through representation and democratic process will give them voice, feelings of solidarity and democratic politics. (4) Affirmative action will build a critical mass of local leadership of such groups will be active participants in the strategic decision-making. Bhargava and others (1996) writes that it was to improve women's representation that the policy of reservation was introduced. According to them, reserving seats for women in the political institutions will provide them and opportunity to raise their grievances and other related social and economic problems in a formal forum, a political process necessary to ensure the improvement for all women in all spheres of life. For participative democracy, it is true that empowerment of women should be fully alive at the grass root level. For ensuring rural development as well as eradication of rural poverty in a sustainable manner at the grass root level, establishing good governance in Panchayati Raj system should be a prerequisite. In order to achieve the good governance in rural sector, the Government (both Centre and State) should attempt to delimit the bureaucratic pressure, to promote local leadership, to remove structural deficiencies, to raise more financial resources and at the same time establishing "Social Audit" in all PRIs network is also one of the best opportunity for shaping the concept of "Developed India" and this is not possible without participation and empowerment of rural downtrodden women.

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