DEVELOPMENT AND PARTICIPATION: 
WOMEN SARPANCH’S IN PUNJAB

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Abstract: This qualitative study has been undertaken to study the obstacles for women in Panchayat and role performance in Panchayat using feminist methodology. In addition, the authors have examined the factors that promote and prevent women members from performing their roles. Lastly, the nature and extent of participation and role performance in decision making is examined. The findings of the study reveals that Women Sarpanches managed to overcome their everyday problems. They lacked no were in terms of capability. The present study is evidence that women tend to follow a path of transformative and peaceful politics.

Index Terms – Women Sarpanches, Transformative Politics, Development, Punjab.

Introduction

“In politics, if you want anything said ask a man, if you want anything done ask a woman.”
—Margaret Thatcher

Politics is an arena associated with good governance for improving the status of society. It aims in the betterment of the society with the help of community participation. Community participation is an essential part of Democracy which caters to the politics. Modern day society entails the full participation of men and women in politics to guarantee equality of status and equal treatment of law to its citizens. According to the UN Human Development Index, the political participation of women in government decision making bodies and their economic participation will lead to empowerment and development of women.

Nevertheless, Politics has various dimensions to it. The most widely used by a feminist scholar is in terms of power relations where one gender exercises the systematic power over the other genders. Political sphere has been central to the feminist movement all over the world because political is personal and vice versa. The greater visibility of women is, in fact, a result of women’s interest in politics that is to gain the suffrage right. Looking back at the history the fight for the right to access the public sphere started with Seneca Fall Convention in 1848. It proved a milestone in the history of women’s movement. The foundation of women participation in the public activity in India can be traced back in the Vedic period. When aggregate local provincial and national associations mobilized women to help in national development as well as improve the position of women in society. But women associated themselves more in public action during the freedom movement which passed through four phases starting from the Swadeshi movement (1904-1911) Non-cooperation (1918-1920), Civil disobedience (1930-1934) and Quit India movement (1942). The marked features of women who involved themselves in public activity during this period were a) most of them hailed from families where male members were active in social, religious and political associations b) very few came from lower-middle or lower class and c) the upper caste women were over-represented. Below is the table to depict the background of Female Activists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade of Birth</th>
<th>Father politician or reformer</th>
<th>Husband politician reformers</th>
<th>School experience</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Pre 1900</th>
<th>1900-1915</th>
<th>1916-1925</th>
<th>1926-1935</th>
<th>1936-1945</th>
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In post-independent India, the women were granted equal rights to participate in politics under the provision of Constitution. However, due to male dominance and nepotism, the political parties didn’t provide enough space for the grass root women to rise up the ladder of politics. Today the story is no different. There has been constant resistance against women in politics in various forms. In post-independent India, the women were granted equal rights to participate in politics under the provision of Constitution. However, due to male dominance and nepotism, the political parties didn’t provide enough space for the grass root women to rise up the ladder of politics. Today the story is no different. There has been constant resistance against women in politics in various forms. As a result of consistent efforts of feminist activists and scholars, the Constitution was amended in the year 1992-93 for the inclusion of women in Grass root politics. These changes in the Constitution are popularly known as the 73rd and 74th amendment. The passage of this act marked a new era in the federal democratic set up of the country and provided the constitutional status to Panchayati Raj Institutions. The act also provided the reservation for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and women. As per the article 243-D of Indian 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 IX of the Constitution are reserved for women.”

Women are changing the governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the constitution that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments. The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in the one village or a larger area such as 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started in 1994. As a result of the amendment, the percentage of women at various levels of political activity has shifted dramatically. The shift is both quantitative and qualitative. Qualitative in the sense, being a part of a government, they are bringing their experience and making the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, hunger, inequalities, and gender injustice. Despite that the fact that the 73rd and 74th amendment has brought about positive change, women continue to face hurdles which discourage and disappoint them to promote the entry of women in politics.

Coming down to Punjab, the Census of India (2011) reveals that Punjab constitutes 2.29% of India’s population which is approximately 2.77 crores. Out of which women are 13,103,873 in numbers. 37.48% of its population lives in urban areas i.e. 5,545,989 are males and 4,853,157 are females. On the other hand, 62.52 percent live in the villages of rural areas. 9,093,476 males and 8,250,716 females are spread across 12581 villages of Punjab.

Definition of Sarpanch

Punjab Panchayati Raj Act defines as "Sarpanch" is head of the Gram Panchayat elected under Section 10 of Punjab Panchayati Raj Act.

Population and Sample

According to the report of Gender Statistics of Punjab (2012), a total of 14 women was elected in Assembly elections of Punjab in the year 2012. Nearly 30 percent of villages had female Sarpanch and female members in Panchayat. Thus, male domination is clearly visible in Punjab politics. Such a kind of domination is the manifestation of patriarchal culture. It impacts the everyday decision-making process of people which further gives birth to structural violence, gender stereotyping etc. So, for the purpose of this study, Women Sarpanches of Punjab who came forward to attend the workshop organized by Department Cum Centre for Women’s Studies and Development, Chandigarh are the universe of the study.

Data and Source of Data

Both primary and secondary data are used for the collection of data. Simple random sampling has been used for selecting the sample. The in-depth study of respondents has been done using an open-ended interview schedule. The data is collected personally from each focus group by researcher’s themselves. Data is analyzed directly by extracting out from the research questions and through examining the data using inductive qualitative analysis.

Review of Literature

Chaudhari (2000) in the study stated “Along with strength of women’s movement in India we have more vocals opposition i.e. failure of different government to steer Women’s Reservation Bill.”

Behera in the study defines proxy women as “figurehead elected women representatives who are supposed to do the bidding of male members of the family rather than take their own decisions”

Nanda in the study has divided into four sections where first part deals with question of reservation for women in PRI. The second section deals with women transforming the politics and last two parts presents some of the important recommendation to ensure the greater participation of women in PRI’s. The author has raised an important question of nepotism in the democracy like “Biwi- Beti Brigade”, ability of elected representative to raise the issues of women. The study appreciates the positive discrimination of PRI to
bring momentum of change in Indian politics which supports the participatory form of democracy. Nevertheless, we need to think beyond the number game.

Mishra in the book\textsuperscript{vii} has tried to paint the overall picture of elected representative women of Malgudi (Karnataka) in PRIs. This qualitative study explored the various aspects of experiences of women in PRI i.e. their motivation and challenges. Six case studies depict how the women are treated as second citizen at the grass-root level of political system of India. The study raised lot of question regarding the legitimacy of patriarchal mindset in PRIs.

**Objectives of the Study**

The study is designed to assess the major factors affecting the performance of Women Sarpanches in the various districts of Punjab and the challenges faced by them and their coping strategies at the workplace.

The specific objectives are:

1) To study the obstacles for women in Panchayat and role performance in Panchayat.
2) To examine the factors that promotes or prevents women members from performing their roles
3) To find out the nature and extent of participation and role performance in decision making.

**Significance of the Study**

The findings of the study will contribute to society considering that women in decision-making authorities can demystify the air of secrecy in Indian politics.

**Research Methodology**

The data was collected during the workshop conducted for Women Sarpanches by Department Cum Centre for Women’s Studies and Development, Chandigarh. Women Sarpanch, as well as Panch from various districts of Punjab, came forward to attend the workshop. Hence, they constitute the universe of the study i.e. Mohali, Rup Nagar, Sangrur. The researchers have opted to choose a qualitative approach primarily because of the production of rich, valid and reliable data. Focused group discussion is the methodological approach taken in the research paper. The focused group has been divided randomly.

**Her Narratives:**

The focus group discussion is the qualitative method and is a better way to collect in-depth knowledge from similar backgrounds, and experiences to discuss the topic of the same interest. Here the researchers had done the focus group interviews with the women sarpanches. For this purpose, they have been divided into five groups. In each group, there were 9 participants. An open-ended interview schedule has been used for the discussion. Interview questions were developed to cover a range of information which covered their achievements and challenges in the context of rural development and also their personal development of Woman Sarpanches.

Talking about the narratives Narratives are always helpful in deconstructing the perceived reality and arriving at the interpretations. It is a method which helps in understanding human experience and emotions. It is always useful to capture live experiences, race, class, gender, and emotion of the subject in question and roots of the identified problem while writing narratives.

In this particular study, narratives were used to explore the fact that as a woman leader of the village what difference they had made by doing rural development. It encompasses the issues of social development, political awareness, and personal development in this highly patriarchal society of Punjab. Before this discussion, it was very important to build rapport with them so that they can feel comfortable and by which they can easily share their experiences and ideas with the researchers. Here it is important to notice that the society or the rural areas from which these women leaders has come it is indeed highly patriarchal, where they are never allowed to speak. So it was very important to know how successful they were in their tenure in shattering these myths of patriarchy.

The following are the narratives of the respondents with whom the conversations were conducted to derive the detailed Responses on the basis of various themes like women who worked on health issues, education issues and so on.

**Health**

- **Woman Sarpanch of village of district Rupnagar Punjab** said that she has organized camps regarding HIV AIDS and drug awareness.
- **Woman Sarpanch from village of district Patiala** said that in their village he conditions of the dispensary was very bad so for the serious concern of the health of the residents of the village. And she has also organized free health check-up camps in her village.
- **Woman Sarpanch form village of district Patiala Punjab** that she has started the hospital which was closed from many years. She made a playground for the youth of the village so that they can make their health instead of going in drugs.
- **Woman Sarpanch of village of district Jalandhar Punjab** said that she is concerned about the health of the youth of her village and for this, she organizes drug awareness camps and seminars on health so that the young people of her village stays away from the drugs.
- **Woman Sarpanch village of district Jalandhar Punjab** said that she organizes the lectures on awareness of HIV AIDS and on the health of the people.
• Woman sarpanch of village of district Gurdaspur Punjab said that she has started the self-help group for the economic independence of women. She has done works for the causes of women by giving them the sewing machines by which they can enable themselves to lead a quality life.
• Woman sarpanch from village of district Gurdaspur Punjab said that she had organized the training sessions of sewing and cooking courses for the girls and women of her village and women were given the certificates after the completion of the course.
• Woman sarpanch from village of district Rupnagar Punjab said that she had started the campaign named “Kudian di Lohri” to promote the celebration of the birth of a girl child. She has also helped the widows of her village by giving them economic assistance.
• Woman sarpanch from village of district Gurdaspur Punjab said that she has started the sewing center in her village so that young girls and women in her village will get training which will be helpful in their future.
• Woman sarpanch from village of district Mohali Punjab said that she had made awareness to the women of her village about government scheme MNREGA. She organized a special session to make them aware of the rules and regulations about the scheme.

Casteism

• Woman sarpanch from village of district Sangrur Punjab said that it is more difficult to work as a sarpanch if you belong to reserved category. People will never cooperate with you because they belong to a different caste.
• Woman sarpanch from village of district Mohali strongly put the pint of casteism in Punjab. As she said that people belong to “jatt” community ask her to come and sign the documents at their home because they cannot come to sarpanch’s home that is in the village’s particular area which is called “vehda” (which means a place where or one side of a village where all the lower caste people of village lives).

Corruption/Challenges

• Women sarpanch from village from district Patiala Punjab also raised the issue of the corruption which is disturbing the rural development of the village. As she said that they cannot get their grants properly.
• Woman sarpanch from village of district Gurdaspur Punjab mentioned the problem of BDOs (block developmental officers) that they never listen to their problems. She said that these officials cannot give them the details of the generation of grants, sometimes it gets delayed, and sometimes half of the amount is given. She suggested that there must be transparency in the system.

Views about politics

Some of them shared views about women in Panchayati Raj has developed the trend of clean and green politics.

• Woman sarpanch from village of district Rupnagar Punjab said that corruption levels in the system will get low if we involve more women in politics at the upper and lower levels. She said that women tend to follow more clean and green politics than males.
• Women sarpanch from village of district Rupnagar Punjab said that women if they will be given equal opportunities they can do better works than males. She has given an example that if a male is a sarpanch the villagers will use his power and money as they will demand the alcohol etc. but if a woman is a sarpanch then nobody demands alcohol from her. So involving women politics can end social evils.

Infrastructure

• Woman Sarpanch of village in her tenure as sarpanch of a village she has made sewerage and one community palace for the people of her village.
• Woman Sarpanch from village of district Mohali Punjab said she had done the developmental works in her villages like the repair of roads, sewerage system, construction of cremation ground, and one Dhamamshala for the residents of the village.
• Woman Sarpanch from village of district Mohali of Punjab said she had done the developmental works in her villages like the repair of roads, school building, and construction of cremation ground.
result

For the development of any society or community, the vigorous participation of its members is needed. And to ensure the participation of women who constitute about 50% of the total population, it is very important to give them the appropriate opportunities. It can be done by taking the measures which make them the active participants of the developmental process of the country.

This study is an attempt to examine the women representatives of the villages as agents of change and also studies their role in rural development along with the challenges they faced. Under 73rd and 74th amendment of the Indian constitution, women have an opportunity to contest elections at the Panchayat level.

The present study is concerned with various districts of Punjab. Punjab is highly patriarchal mindsets. The perception about Punjabi’s about women is that they can only work in the private domain and men can work in the public domain. Since politics is primarily associated with the public sphere. Thus, women are not supposed to enter the public sphere. Nevertheless, slow and gradual change is observed at the grassroots level in India. Women are entering the realm of politics. They are contesting election to be elected in legislative assemblies as well as in Panchayats.

The reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions was a small step for the upliftment of the women in the state like Punjab. With this, Sarpanches have surely gained the confidence to do something unconventional. The Sarpanches has rigorously worked towards the social and human developmental projects in their village. Yet it is important to mention here that the journey of Sarpanches was not easy. They had faced many problems, challenges by the patriarchal society. However, they managed to overcome the problems, and remain committed to their work. They are nowhere lacking in their capabilities in comparison to men. In fact, they think that they can do better politics than males. The present study is evidence that women tend to follow a path of transformative and peaceful politics. And as a
result of it, some women sarpanches are doing quite well in their area that they are being elected as 3 times as the representative of the village. The political exposure has helped them to realize their full potential.

In contrast, there are some issues which are needed to be addressed. It is true that women are working well in the local level administration but this is not in the case of all women. In the areas of Punjab which are considered as backward,

- Sarpanches are used as “rubber stamps” i.e. they are just used for some signature purposes. They don’t even know what development has been done in their village under their name.
- Due to socialization, some of the women admit that they are not meant for a political arena or any post which is associated with power. They are fit for the household work, and decision making should vest in the hands of the male member of the family (husband, brother, father).
- Another important issue is of casteism in Punjab. There is the dominance of only one particular caste who wants the power in their hands. Thus, the problem faced by lower caste women Sarpanch is vastly ignored. And Dalit women Sarpanch are abused by the people of the upper caste community.
- Other issues of corruption and dominance of the regional political parties are also there which affect the functioning of the local level administration of Sarpanches.

There is an urgent need to take steps to address these issues which are becoming obstacles in the paths of the women. To deal with the issues the government can take measures regarding this.

- Women themselves have to come forward to support the other women in politics. And they should not be used as mere rubber stamps by the men.
- They have to recognize the capabilities in themselves by which they can set an example of good governance in the villages.
- Along the development of the concrete infrastructure of the village, Sarpanches must take steps for the development of the women and children of their villages.
- They should take the steps for the economic empowerment of the women by which they can lead a good life. And most importantly they should work to aware the women about their legal rights.
- The government and the civil society should also take the lawful steps to check the corruption levels at the local administrations.
- Along the development of the concrete infrastructure of the village, Sarpanches must take steps for the development of the women and children of their villages.
- They should take the steps for the economic empowerment of the women by which they can lead a good life. And most importantly they should work to aware the women about their legal rights.
- The government and the civil society should also take the lawful steps to check the corruption levels at the local administrations.

It can help to bring transparency in the distribution of the funds to Panchayats. As a result of it, the funds can directly be accessed by the Sarpanches rather than the mediators. The governmental bodies must concrete steps for an aforesaid statement.

- Further, the government should take some measures by which they can increase the participation of women in the local level politics, and also remove the obstacles and the challenges that are being faced by the women in their tenure.
- Another important aspect of the caste system in villages should also be checked so that the lower caste women can also enjoy their rights in the same manner as the upper caste women.
- The most important thing to do is to change the mind-sets of the people about women.

So there is a need to change our perceptions, our preconceived notions about women. And for this we have to start from our own families, by giving the chance or opportunity to the women members of our family, allowing them to take their own decisions. With this, we can set an example for others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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