

50% Reservation of Women in Panchayats : A Step towards Gender Equity

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“The State Government will soon take steps to reserve 50% positions for women in Panchayati Raj institutions from 2012 elections as their role in these Bodies is significant,” Hon’ble Chief Minister Shri Naveen Patnaik told a public meeting on the occasion of the 94th birth anniversary of his father legendary Mr. Biju Patnaik.

This statement of Hon’ble Chief Minister was largely applauded by the PRI members across the state and a new dream brewed among the women community. Panchayat leaders make a difference and that bringing women into politics may help in improving their welfare. Reduced fertility may be achieved by increasing women’s bargaining power in the family and society at large. And an effective democracy with adequate women’s representation may be more effective by achieving it than regulation that takes away from women what the 73rd Amendment guarantees them.

Even Star Plus, the favourite national channel in India, celebrates the family with the woman at its core. It dedicates its success to every woman in this country who is slowly but progressively bringing about the *Nayi Soch* (meaning new thinking) in her life, in the lives of her family members and society at large. But

in reality can we think the same about women in rural areas ?

Woman brings us into the world and strives relentlessly to keep our world together. She touches our life in various avatars; as a daughter she brings joy and laughter, as a wife she offers support and companionship, as a mother she instills beliefs and values. Her entire existence is dedicated to the well being of her loved ones and in fulfilling her family’s needs.

From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. The Indian woman’s position in the society further deteriorated during the medieval period when Sati among some communities, child marriages and a ban on widow remarriages became part of social life among some communities in India. In modern India, women have adorned high offices in India including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of Opposition, etc.

The status of women in India has been undergoing a sea-change. Supported by Constitutional guarantees to ensure dignity and equal opportunities, their active participation in all walks of life including education, politics, sport

etc., has been growing. Taking note of women's role in the nation-building activities, the Government had declared 2001 as the year of *Women's Empowerment* by adopting a National Policy to offer "Swashakti" to women. Several laws have also been adopted to empower women socially, economically, legally and politically.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles of State Policy. The Constitution not only guarantees equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Since the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78), India has been making a marked shift in its approach to women's issues from welfare to development while keeping the empowerment of women as the central issue in determining their status in the society. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution in 1993 have provided for reservation of seats in the Local Bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision-making at the local levels. India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993.

Considering the role of rural India, the country's backbone, the Government had taken several measures to strengthen Panchayati Raj system with the active participation of women. This gave a boost to increase the number of

women being elected to the 3 tier system, an indication to suggest their political empowerment.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment have created space for women in political participation and decision making at the grass root level by providing that 1/3rd of the seats are reserved in all over the country. 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 says- "It provides reservations for women in PRIs set up in two ways; for the office of the members and for that of the chairpersons". As per the clause (2) and (3) of Article 243(d), not less than one third of the seats meant for direct election of members at each tier of the Panchayats are to be reserved for the women. Although the percentages of women in various levels of political activity have risen considerably, women are still under-represented in governance and decision making positions.

Before 73rd Constitutional Amendment came into force Government of Orissa had adopted some of the important provisions such as reservation for women, SC, STs in its existing Panchayat Raj Acts. Subsequently, Orissa Panchayati Raj Acts were further amended for full conformity with the Constitutional Amendment. Elections to Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis in Orissa were held before 73rd Amendment came into force. Accordingly Orissa became the first State to introduce one third reservation for women in Panchayats. The State conducted elections for Panchayat Raj Institutions in 1997 and implemented 33% reservation of seats for women in PRIs at a time when the centre was still only deliberating on this issue. But politically it is too early to assess their impact on governance.

Studies on village Panchayat in Orissa found that women entered into politics due to mandatory provision of reservation. Most of the

women are from non-political background and entered into politics due to persuasion by their family members or pressure from the village community. It is often seen that husbands and extended family members influence the women representatives in taking decisions. In most cases the women representatives are ignored and they are invariably influenced by family members. But while continuing in their positions women who reluctantly entered into politics showed great maturity in outlook, enthusiasm, increasing political consciousness and increasing perception of their role and responsibility.

The tradition bound Oriya society still maintains a restricted social conduct for social and political transformation, gender equity and an enabling environment for the women of Orissa to realize their full potential and contribute their might to the development of the State. Though gender equity in political arena is overshadowed by illiteracy, superstitions and orthodox mindset, cultural and social barriers which in fact compound the problems of women. Yet hope still lies in reservation of women as gaining political power is a prerequisite for overcoming societal injustices.

When women succeed in overcoming heavy odds to achieve good results in panchayats

and also face vested interests with courage, it has an exemplary impact on a large number of other women. They also want to come forward to participate more actively in village affairs and contribute to the welfare of the community. The more active role of women in village often contributes to the welfare of the entire community and several important areas which were neglected earlier now get prioritised. Thus it is in the interests of not just women but the entire village community to encourage the further empowerment of women in village affairs. The 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions is an important part of this empowerment of women. To further strengthen the effort of elected women representatives, the government should provide greater security to women from the anger of powerful vested interests who try to harm and harass them in various ways. Moreover Government and Voluntary organisations together should jointly make an attempt in building the capacity of the elected women representatives.

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Eminent Educationist Shri Srikant Panda as Chief Guest is distributing the prizes to the winner students at Indian Association Hall, Bow Bazar, Kolkata on the occasion of observance of Republic Day Celebration 2011 organised by Information & Public Relations Department, Kolkata Unit, Government of Orissa.