Women Empowerment: The Role of Panchayat

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A constitutional sanction to establish democracy at the grassroot level was felt by the planners. They proposed that the district planning body should have autonomy to chalk out schemes on the basis of felt needs of the area where people should be made aware of the various plans and programmes and their participation should be ensured. Balwant Rai Mehta Committee (1957) observed that unless local initiatives and local institutions were utilized together in the process of improving socio-eco condition of rural area, the real democratic values could not be achieved. Hence community needs to be involved in the planning, decision making and implementation process through the varying models of planning which are in operation in different parts of the country. Shri Hanumanta Rao Committee recommended in 1984 that strong decentralisation of powers, functions and finances starting from village level to block and district level could be made stronger. In 1985 GVK Rao Committee recommended ‘district panchayat to manage all rural development programmes with administrative arrangement’. V Ramachandran Committee (2006) recommended “action programme for the eleventh 5 year plan in the grassroot level”. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 (effective from 24th April 1993) guaranteed democracy at the grassroot levels. This grass root level system is Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is a three tier system with elected bodies at the village, block and the district level. This new system has spread over the length and breadth of the country covering over 95% of India. The purpose is to provide access to administration for the citizens at their doorstep and to ensure that opportunities for access are not denied to any citizen. The objective of most of the recent schemes being implemented by gram panchayat is to protect environment, provide food security, to create infrastructure like Bijli Sadak and Pani to every remote village and to provide sustainable income to poor through the schemes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Gurantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Sampurna
Gramin Rojagar Yojna (SGRY), Gopabandhu Gramin Yojana (GGY), Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY) etc.

For changing governance and effective implementation of rural development programmes, people are being elected to local councils with unprecedented participation of women. This huge mandate is coming through constitutional amendments of reservation of seats for women in the local governments. In 1992 the Parliament of India enacted two constitutional amendments: 1. Action to democratise local governance 2. Quota based reservation for women.

Women empowerment

The process of restructuring the national, political and administrative structure system was started from Jan 1994. So that the state could be sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice. The gender related index is lower than values on human development index. Limited choice of occupation and the lack of opportunities are always accompanied with gender inequality. However increasing women representation in local bodies and their entrance into vocational fields have automatically led to a more gendered analysis and women profile. A total development of the country requires maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields. It is therefore imperative to examine these areas and seek improvement in them. A total development of the country requires maximum participation of women in all fields. And for a more just and equal world in social, economic and political structure women’s movement needs a fundamental transformation to attack the root cause of gender inequality. And women need to be provided with specific kind of support to build solidarity amongst them through elected bodies. Empowerment is the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions.

To give a boost to the hot discussed topic on women empowerment the Odisha Assembly has gone one step ahead by amending Gram Panchayat Act 1964 through Odisha Panchayat Law (Amendment) Bill 2011. It has enhanced the quota for women from existing 33 percent to 50 percent in PRI. This reservation for women in PRI aimed to achieve gender equity in the representation in the Panchayatiraj bodies with a mission to implementation of different schemes for economic development and social justice.

The ICDS and IWDS schemes were launched by GOI in 1975 and expanded over 5000+ projects throughout India for the empowerment, upliftment and welfare of women and children. The benefitting areas namely Education, Health, Family welfare, Nutrition, justice and equality were focussed for the welfare of women and children. Economic and social empowerment of women, protection to sexual harassment, protection to domestic violence, dowry prohibition, prohibition to child marriage and right to property were some of the major issues which were given due importance. Beti Bachao (save girl child), Balika Samriddhi Yojana (girl child development), Kishori Shakti Yojana (adolescents strength and awareness), Swayam sidha Yojana (self reliance and empowerment), Krishi Talim Yojana (agricultural skill development) are some of the important projects operating under WCD. In addition there are certain legislation and law for the women which are landmark in giving legal recourse to victims and awarding deterrent punishment to the abettors. Some of them are:-

- Hindu Marriage Act 1955
- Hindu Succession Act 1956
- Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956
- Dowry Prohibition Act 1961
- Medical Termination Pregnancy Act 1971
- Child Marriage Restraint Act 1976
- Equal Remuneration Act 1976
- Indecent representation of women (prohibition) Act 1986
- Commission of Sati (prevention) Act 1987
- Protection of Domestic Violence Act 2005

**‘Mission Shakti’** was a holistic empowerment programme launched on 8.3.2001 by the W&CD, Govt of Odisha on the occasion of international women’s day to make the women of the state self sufficient through SHG. It provided technical training to women by using govt and nongovt infrastructures and the areas of technical inputs are handicrafts, forest produce, horticulture, mushroom cultivation pisciculture, diary, poultry etc. SHG is an offshoot of the combined effort of NABARD and MYRADA (Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency) with an experiment of small saving and credit group. The existence of mini banks, Mahila Samiti etc. of Odisha are the grounds of privilege for the functioning of SHG. The nationalized banks focus on rural lending to weaker sections especially women to bring them to mainstream besides IRDP, PMRY and other programmes as well. Prof.Mohd.Yunu’s vision of Bangladeshi Gramin Bank model translated it’s ethos into action in most of the developing countries. The unique approach of SHG is financial intermediation. It combines social mobilization, capacity building and low cost management techniques. Women empowerment through SHG has achieved a great success in and around the country. The administration of the scheme is aimed at the following:

- Economic security and improvement of saving habit.
- Creating assets and improving family income.
- Better schooling and better health care.
- Taking advantage of government welfare schemes and utilization of bank loans.
- Exposure to market network
- Help women abandon the clutches of local money lenders
- Encouraging women’s participation in household decisions making.
- Mobilize financial resources.
- Timely credit assistance to the needy.
- Community work out of SHG earning.
- Remarkable people’s participation

Mission Shakti’ an umbrella organization provides support to banks, NGOs and other stakeholders working in the field of women empowerment. The key features include: the strategic intervention between the federations at panchayat and block level and the institution building support for micro investment plans. Govt have been keen in implementation of socially useful programmes and the following are some of the govt sponsored programmes already under implementation through WSHG:-

**Swabalamban** : This scheme is in operation through Mahila Vikas Samabaya Nigam since 1998. The objective is setting up income generating units and providing support to projects sponsored by public undertaking or corporation. The target groups are vulnerable women from rural or urban slums.

**Swadhar**: In 2001-2002 this scheme was launched to help widows, destitute and women released from prison. The objective is providing support to their economic rehabilitation. **Family counselling centres**: The aim of the scheme is providing assistance for free legal aid, and rehabilitative service to women victims so that harmonious relationship could prevail in the society.
**Mahila mandal programme**: This scheme provides training and health services to women especially balwadi and maternity services.

**Short stay homes**: This centralised scheme provides counselling and guidance for skill development and to cope with the distress situations arising out of family disturbances.

**Mahila and sishu desk**: Women and child desks are operative in all police stations of Odisha to attend to the grievance of the vulnerable sections and to provide legal protection to the victims.

**State commission for women**: State Commission for Women formed since 1993 coordinate with the state cell and district cells for atrocities against women. It recommends to the state govt regarding the working conditions in different factories, industries and different establishments to improve women status in those areas.

**Human Rights Commission**: Human Rights Commission set up in Odisha by 2006 did strive for protecting and promoting human rights. The Commission deals with the following areas for women and children.

- Sexual harassment of women at workplace
- Prevention and combating child marriage
- Domestic violence
- Child labour and child abuse
- Registration of marriage

Besides, judiciary for gender sensitization, child protection law, anti trafficking law, plan and action to end trafficking and set up of national advisory committee are some of the legal safeguards provided by Commission to prevent trafficking in women and children.

However in a patriarchy system of social structure men dominate, suppress and exploit women. The fixed social structure and the indoctrination of the system of patriarchy play a dominant role in favour of this notion. But there has been a shift of feminist ideology and woman now is seeking for her freedom of livelihood and she is now struggling against the man’s monopoly of civilization. A sustainable development of women has been increased in India through Panchayati Raj system and NGOs have been geared up to protect the Human Rights. They are no more stagnant and isolated as they used to be in the past. They are now emerging as a big force in every walk of life.

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