

## Necessity of Promoting Woman in the Field of Governance as a Political Leader at the Village Level in Odisha

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A Developing democracy like India needs wider participation of the people irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex etc. in Its political process. In order to provide this opportunity, the system of democratic decentralization through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has long been introduced in our country. As the women constitute a very sizeable portion of the total population of India, their participation at grass root politics is so essential to make the democratic governance more successful. The question of their participation arises because of their long standing neglected social status in the male dominated Indian society. Immediately after framing of the Indian Constitution, constitutional safeguards along with the provision of reservation of seats in legislative bodies, public offices and public educational institutions, were, therefore, provided to them for their uplift.

In Odisha, women constitute a very little bit less than 50 percent of the state's total population. Despite some favorable traditional values and customs and emergence of powerful women personalities, the position of the woman is not very rosy. That socioeconomic status is, however, relatively low and they are discriminated against in all walks of life. For centuries, women have been confined to home and suppressed and

deprived of their rights to get a fair treatment from the male dominated society. Development of women has, therefore, been one of the major issues in Odisha.

I am intended to focus on the empowerment of women in Odisha, through the Panchayati Raj System, specifically through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment which has opened up the process of what actually our policy makers wanted. The makers of Panchayati Raj System desired rural women should not only become a beneficiary of development, but more importantly contribute to it. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act involves the participation of women as voters, women as members of political parties, women as candidates, women as elected members of PRIs taking part in decision-making, planning implementation and evaluation.

Research shows that the success of panchayats in focusing on women's strategic gender interests has been mixed. There have been some positive outcomes for individual women, and instances of women chairpersons and members taking on cases of alcoholism and violence against women. However, examples of panchayats being forums that systematically

address and challenge the violation of women's rights, gender inequities and different forms of violence are few. There is a need to better understand how PRIs can become more engaged and proactive around strategic gender issues and provide spaces to promote gender equity within an overall framework of gender responsive governance.

Despite the long history of reservations for women in Odisha, numerical strength has not been an indicator of women's effective participation in local governance. The main reason behind this is women's unequal status vis-a-vis men both at the level of society and within the family. Low socio-economic status (e.g., low literacy rates, lower income/ earning capacity, etc.) and traditional norms that keep women in subordinate positions are also factors that impede women's effective participation. The low position of women in society is evident from declining sex ratios in the state. However, contrary to commitments made at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), on discarding targeted population control policies/ measures, Odisha implements two-child policy. This provides for the disqualification from the elected office of persons with more than two children. This policy has a disproportionate impact on already marginalized women candidates.

Women participate in the Panchayat system in two ways - as elected representatives and as part of the electorate participating in Gram Sabhas and Palli Sabhas proceedings. In the case of the former, EWRs, (Elected Women Representatives) a number of challenges are faced in ensuring their effective functioning- 'proxy leadership' being the main challenge. 'Proxy leadership' means that in practice, male family members of the EWRs act on their behalf.

Due to their subordinate status as women, EWRs are often subject to familial and societal controls that affect their work. They may insist on physically accompanying EWRs in conducting their activities or EWRs require permission from their families prior to attending meetings and performing their tasks. Further, time spent in discharging EWR functions may impact on much needed income generation activities.

At the societal level, EWRs are not taken as seriously as their male counterparts, particularly when they approach the local administration with complaints and petitions received. Additionally, low literacy levels and the lack of practical hands-on training severely impact EWRs effective functioning. There have been reported instances of violence against EWRs both within the domestic sphere as well as outside it. In practical terms, the efficacy of an EWR is much dependent on individual capacity and commitment. However, it is also observed that EWRs in their second or later terms are more confident and assertive than first timers".

As far as the participation of women members of the electorate is concerned, the Odisha GP Act explicitly requires the presence of women in Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha to achieve quorums. However, this has had limited impact on ensuring women's participation in such meetings. Women have little awareness of Gram Sabha meetings being held. Their reluctance to enter public spaces, due to superstitions and gender stereotypical roles and attitudes, have resulted in low to nil attendance levels over the past years. In fact, the Collector of the comparatively developed district of Dhenkanal observed that until 2010, Gram Sabhas were attended solely by men. In rare instances where

women attended such meetings, they were unable to participate effectively in the proceedings due to their inability to speak publicly and embarrassment experienced when putting forth their demands concerning intimate aspects of their lives, particularly aspects of reproductive health and domestic violence. In the past, women might be more likely to approach the Sarpanch or EWR (who could be a ward representative or a Sarpanch) with her problem than to bring it up in a Gram Sabha or Palli Sabha meeting.

The State has a number of schemes/initiatives aiming to empower women, which are funded by either the central or state governments. Each of these schemes is administered through a nodal agency or line department, which engage separate personnel for implementation and service delivery. To illustrate, the National Rural Livelihood Mission of the Ministry of Rural Development, which aims to increase household income and skill development through self managed 'selfhelp groups' (SHG) is implemented by the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). Another illustration is the centrally sponsored 'Integrated Child Development Services' (ICDS) Scheme aimed at providing creche, nutrition, health, and education services. The Women and Child Development Department implements this scheme and 'anganwadi' workers are engaged to deliver services at the local level. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, (and the national government scheme by the same name) guarantees 100 days of paid work in a year, and gives preference to women seeking employment. Projects to be funded by this scheme (generally small local environmental improvement or public infrastructure projects) are meant to be identified in Gram Sabha meetings, and job cards for eligible

beneficiaries are to be allotted in Gram Sabha meetings. In addition to central and state government schemes there are also a number of laws and legal provisions to address violence against women. However, women, particularly in rural areas, lack awareness of available government schemes and of these laws and have inadequate access to legal services and advice.

### CONCLUSION :

We can reach at a conclusion that the participation of women in the affairs of the Panchayat administration is not up to the mark as compared to their male counterparts. The awareness, interest and involvement of women in Gram Panchayat elections is still in the darkness of traditional culture. A lot of them don't know about the different political parties functioning in our country, but they only know the symbols which they voted for. In other words, they are mere instruments in the hands of the political parties, and by political participation they simply understand casting votes. Though they are regarded as voters, they don't know the value of votes. Even the ones who hold the political posts are suppressed and guided by their male counterparts. They have very little sense about the provisions like voting age, voting age of a person to contest in the election, the period of elections, the provision of fundamental rights, the reservation of seats for women in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, Assemblies and Parliament etc. Their interaction with the Gram Panchayat is quite less and they never put forth their demands before the Gram Panchayat about the facilities and privileges meant for them. This is because of their lack of consciousness and low levels of education. So, in the light of the above analysis, it is quite obvious that a number of

reasons are responsible for their apathy and indifferent attitude towards political participation. As a result, women are not only politically, but also socially, economically, culturally and educationally very backward. Thus it is imperative to create a more favourable environment which would enable the women to play a more effective role in decentralized development.

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