

RAJIV GANDHI AND PANCHAYATI RAJ: ROLE OF WOMEN IN PARTICIPATION OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

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The president Dr. Subhash Kashyapji, the Chief Guest Shri Salman Kurshidji, the Special Guest Shri Murlidhar C. Bhandareji, AGRASRI Director Dr. D. Sundar Ram, invitees, print and electronic media, ladies and gentle men.

It is my privilege and honour to deliver the 9th Bharat Ratna Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Lecture and confer the Bharat Ratna Rajiv Gandhi Outstanding Leadership Award on me for the year 2010, by the Academy of Grassroots Studies and Research of India (AGRASRI), Tirupati based research organisation, in collaboration with the Rajiv Rural Development Foundation (RRDF), Tirupati. I am grateful to the Board of Governors of AGRASRI and RRDF, for having chosen me for this prestigious award for the year 2010.

“They (the women) don’t want the Moon, but just a part in Decision-Making”

Our great leader, Father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi advocated a vision long ago when he first conceptualised the idea of ‘Gram Swaraj’ along with Swaraj for the country as a whole. In a nation of over 6 lakh villages, this meant allowing the villages to experience the joys of independence and self-governance instead of restricting this privilege to a select few in the higher reaches of the administrative hierarchy.

Women’s political empowerment in past several years through the Constitution amendments has exploded several myths, like the belief that they are passive and disinterested in political institutions; only the well-to-do, upper strata women will come through reservation; only the kin of powerful politicians will enter panchayats through political connectivity to keep the seats for them; and lastly and most importantly, women are only proxy- “name sake” members and they do not participate in the panchayats. Without discounting the existence in panchayats of some women who do fit into this patriarchally oriented framework, one can say that these myths have now been buried. Today the buzzword is that ‘women can do it’.

However, the historic 73rd & 74th Constitutional Amendments, creating the Panchayati Raj Institutions as a third tier of government, are over a decade old now. States have, in keeping with the mandate of the amendments, enacted conformity Acts. Numerous attempts have been made to dilute the impact of amendments and the Conformity Acts, on economic and political governance. However, the facts that the PRIs have been created and that they have survived, give enough room for optimism that over the years, they would eventually become true sense of the terms.

- *Text of the Nineth Bharat Ratna Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Lecture, delivered by Dr (Mrs) V. Mohini Giri, Former Chairperson, National Commission for Women, Govt. of India, held on 8th March, 2011 at India International Centre Annexe Auditorium, New Delhi, under the aegis of Academy of Grassroots Studies and Research of India (AGRASRI), in Collaboration with Rajiv Rural Development Foundation, Tirupati, AP.*

During the course of the operation of its functioning, the task force on Panchayati Raj at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation found that capacity building of Officials and elected functionaries of PRIs was important, but the needs of the women elected members of PRIs were different in some very important aspects because, a majority of them are first generation entrants into realm of Panchayat governance, traditionally a male bastion.

The above experience of having women in PRI, it is quite evident that an Affirmative Action to reserve seats for women in parliament would be a step in the right direction. Off-course, the question then arises whether reservation for women in Parliament is the right tool for empowerment. This may though be debatable, yet it is certainly true that women of this country have a long way to go before they can achieve their potential. They are hampered by low levels of education, lack of access to health care, lack of employment, and low social status which manifests in crimes such as female foeticide, dowry deaths and domestic violence.

Till such time women are given decision making roles things will not change and gender based budgeting will elude us. Even as we recognise that laws by themselves are inadequate because most women in India do not have the awareness, the resources or the ability to benefit from them. It is desirable that a massive legal awareness program is launched to educate the boys and girls in various institutions.

The exposure of women to political debates and issues has always remained indirect. According to women from all parties the political environment was not conducive to women's participation in politics. The analysis made by Kumari and Kidwai stated that political parties have dominated the conservative cultural perspective and no conscious attempt has been made to increase active participation of women.

Women in India today are agitating at the doors of parliament, demanding reservation for 33 per cent of the seats. The issue at stake here is more complex than it may seem. It is not only a question of a few more or few less women in the corridors of Parliament and legislatures, but also a response to the fact that a large section of society has historically been denied its legitimate share in the exercise of political power, power that ultimately determines its destiny. In this demand for reservation, women are also raising their voice against a system, which has consistently denied them space by harnessing the forces of tradition in order to marginalise and trivialise their role.

Reservation of seats for women in Panchayats or municipal bodies have shown that it has tremendous implications, not merely in terms of the number of women entering the public arena and holding public office, but also in terms of the social, economic and political impact that these reservations have had for the total system. It is for these reasons that women are increasingly demanding political roles for themselves. They recognise that constitutional guarantees do not ensure effective participation and that these cannot ensure political equality. Hence the need to gain entry into political institutions and in the functioning of the state, and to share control over power the state exercises. This alone would lead to a situation when women are able to reverse

the existing situation, which has consistently been against their interests, and bring about the necessary changes in policy and the social structure so as to ensure a more equitable and humane order.

The role of women's participation in elected bodies should not be undervalued. Elections are after all a forum for self government and democracy; they are significant in drawing the attention of the nation to the problems and needs of disadvantaged sections: the manifestoes, campaigns, promises made by individual candidates, track records and future course of action of political parties are indicative of national concerns as well as mandates for action. Proper selection of candidates in an election is vital if this representative democracy is to function in the interests of a majority of the population that is depressed and disadvantaged. Hence opportunities for participation at this level are significant for the adoption of policies and measures for women's development.

Strong and Dynamic Women who would not dream of appropriating privilege are today talking of reservation because they have come to recognise that they will not get "easy entry" in the corridors of power without reservation. The hierarchy is so rigid that natural processes of democracy and constitutional guarantees have not been able to make a dent in these fortresses of power. The demand for reservation should not therefore be seen as either a gift or a privilege that women are seeking. For most women it is the last straw and a desperate measure to ensure their coming into the political mainstream. The participation becomes vital in context of the adoption of development strategies that are negative and harmful to women.

Today most of the political parties have not yet developed any special programmes to meet the special requirements of women in urban or rural areas, despite the fact that most of the women activists felt that if planned efforts were made, they could be easily mobilised.

Inclusive growth by its very definition implies an equitable allocation of resources with benefits accruing to every section of society. Whereas, in today's India, inequality has grown faster than anything else.

Approach Paper on the Eleventh Five Year Plan "Towards faster and more inclusive growth" reflects the need to make growth "more inclusive" in terms of benefits flowing through more employment and income to those sections of society which have been bypassed by higher rates of economic growth witnessed in recent years.

The recognition of the need for more inclusive growth by our planners is a welcome shift in emphasis from mere increase in growth rates to improvement in standards of living of those below the poverty line through increase in employment opportunities as well as better delivery systems to ensure access to intended benefits by intended beneficiaries.

With the passage of the 73rd Amendment, India is at a crucial juncture in the evolution of PRIs—the Indian brand of rural local self-government that has envisioned people's participation in the process of planning, decision-making, implementation and delivery system.

Gender equality and gender equity are emerging as major challenges in the global development debate. Social scientists and development activists are giving increasing emphasis to these fields in their agenda for research and development. As Noble Prize-winning economist Prof. Amartya Sen has pointed out, "Democracy is not only the goal of development, it is the primary means of development." Women's participation in political processes is important for strengthening democracy and for their struggle against marginalisation, trivialisation and oppression. Emergence of women as a strong group would change the prevailing political practices, the nature and content of debates in the legislature and women's issues can be taken care of from the feminist perspective both in policy formulation and implementation.

But due to the vitiated political milieu, resulting from increasing politicisation and criminalisation of politics, the level of political participation of women has been adversely affected despite the fact that there has been a marked increase in the level of literacy and political awareness among women.

Women are considered an extremely pivotal point in the process of change in the rural areas. Women's participation in PRIs provided opportunities to women to participate in the decision-making process. Women's participation proved to be the most effective instrument in bringing about a change in their way of life in terms of economic well-being and adoption of new technology. Women's entry into PRIs, both as members as well as heads of PRIs, has pushed them into the policy-making and policy-implementation process in a very big way. Whether their husbands, fathers, brothers or other relatives compelled them to take up these roles, or whether they assumed these roles as dummy incumbents, one thing is certain: they crossed the rigid boundaries drawn through their households by the same male relatives.

Let us now discuss the emerging challenges in women's political participation. Today 33 per cent of candidates participating in the PRIs are women. 'In general, participation at local level can be viewed from two angles—quality and quantity. As far as the qualitative aspect is concerned, there are three levels of quality of participation: passive participation, active participation and decision-making participation.'

But women representatives lack this aspect of qualitative participation. A constitutional provision is only a necessary step which should be followed by effective measures for women's upliftment in the rural areas. To make women's participation in society and politics a reality, enormous work remains to be done, given their present socio-economic conditions.

Further, I would like to emphasise that unless structural changes are brought about, a sincere effort is made to educate women and the power structures existing in rural areas are neutralised, nothing much can be achieved. Women representatives often run into barriers (especially of family and society) and are hindered from participating effectively. They feel inhibited to speak especially when they are in large male dominated assemblies. Those who muster up enough courage and strength to speak receive very little respect or attention. It has been observed that women are invited only to complete the quorum.

Furthermore, the officials also pay heed to the needs of upper class women in preference to the needs of peasant women. The rights of women thus get systematically nullified by the local bureaucracy.

There are some other limitations regarding women's qualitative participation in PRIs:

- ❖ Male family members and also leaders from the caste group/community come in the way of the affairs of the Panchayats.
- ❖ Indifferent attitude and behaviour of officials working in the system.
- ❖ Misguidance by the local bureaucracy.
- ❖ Apprehension of no-confidence motion by other elected members of the system.
- ❖ Mounting pressure from the political party which has vested interests in the gender reservation for positions in the PR system.

Women representatives face problems at every stage of their participation—from the Gram Sabha to Zilla Parishad. 'In an Open Forum organised by the Rural Litigation And Entitlement Kendra for 300 elected women representatives of PRIs of Uttar Pradesh, the following observations were made by the participants:

- ❖ Government orders on devolution of powers to PRIs were a mockery.
- ❖ There was a blatant practice of 'commission' demanded by Block level staff.
- ❖ Women were branded as 'incompetent' in the eyes of villagers and were forced to quit through the passing of no-confidence motions.
- ❖ Undue interference by the husband (post sarpanchs) of women representatives, treating them as mere dummies.
- ❖ Widespread use of corrupt practices among the male members and bureaucrats.

It is clear that mere reservation is not enough because a woman representative lacks qualitative participation due to both internal and external factors. Woman's empowerment is not something which can be handed over to women only. This is a process which involves sincerity, earnestness and capacity and capability on the part of both men and women. It is a challenging task in village India as even today she cannot take any independent decision. She feels subordinate to her husband and even to her son.

There is a need to empower rural women to enhance their quality of participation. The awakening of women in India towards a society where justice and brotherhood prevail, can best be achieved by woman-to-woman contact. The cultural patterns of Indian society are such that social progress among women can be promoted effectively through the medium of personal relationship among them. It is women who can inspire confidence and offer stimulus for social change especially among their sisters in the rural areas. Hence, effective leadership among women must come from the ranks of women themselves. Their qualitative participation can be achieved through training besides of course the literacy educational programmes. Mahila Mandals could be activated for this purpose where women could learn skills and acquire confidence. Links have to be strengthened between the village and the bureaucracy at the lower level.

Special programmes on the role of women in PRIs, on rights of women and procedures should be prepared and highlighted through the mass media so as to make women aware and improve the quality of their participation in the socio-political system. The commitment to political empowerment must be supplemented by a new conceptualisation of women's role in the economy of India. The government (Ministry of Women and Child Development) should take the responsibility to make the rural women aware about their rights and responsibilities.

There should be a remedy for each problem of rural women participation. It should be followed by comprehensive empowerment policies and programmes. Few remedies can be undertaken, for example,

- ❖ Need of Upgradation—Most of the women in rural areas feel inferior to male members of family/Panchayats. This attitude needs to change to make women as part and parcel of the family as well as Panchayats. It is necessary to inculcate confidence among them and to bring attitudinal changes through training in the psyche of the upper classes.
- ❖ Need of Independence since Early Stages—In Indian villages, girls remain dependent upon the father, brother or cousin and this very feeling continues in their married life. We must give capacity building training to girls in schools to be independent.' The programmes of free universal education upto the age of 14 should be vigorously implemented. The courses of studies should inculcate the values of gender equality, self-respect, courage, independence etc. which would help to develop the personalities of girls/ women. Besides this, unless arrangements are made for child care and other domestic responsibilities, sustained participation of women in the public sphere is not possible.'
- ❖ With Regard to Representation at of PRIs there is a Need of Taking Independent Decision. For this, women representatives in PRIs must be trained in the art and science of decision-making so that they are not influenced by extraneous factors. They must develop leadership qualities. They should discuss among other women and take their opinion.' All women members of Panchayats and other executive bodies must be trained and empowered to exercise their authority. Particular attention must be paid to the development of inter-personal communication skills among the community leaders. Efforts are required to elicit participation of women by establishing links between the elected representatives and the development functionaries, to persuade women to come forward to assume responsibilities. This requires special orientation camps for the rural elite.
- ❖ To get away with problem of lack of Interest and Knowledge, there is a Need of Enthusiasm and Training. They must generate enthusiasm within themselves by making a goal and attach themselves to the altar with a spirit of dedication and reverence. It is also suggested that PRIs prepare publicity material in local languages. Audio-visual and print media can contribute significantly to the dissemination of information.
- ❖ No Forum to Exchange Ideas: Need for All Women Forum'. The empowerment process requires social change by organising and mobilising the women's groups for struggle. Mahila Mandals should be formed in all the villages and get the full support of the National Commission for Women (NCW) and other women's welfare-based NGOs.

- ❖ 'Women MLAs and MPs do not take Interest in them. Hence, there is a Need of Motivation by their own Examples. The national and regional political parties can play an important role in making them aware about the process, values and working of democratic institutions.

Empowerment has multidimensional focus and its success depends on environmental forces in a given society. For that, a healthy environment is a must for women's empowerment at the grass-root level. Drawing lessons from experiences at the local, national and international levels is important.

At the end, it can be said that 33 per cent reservation for women in PRIs is a good step but it should be supplemented with effective measures that ensure the qualitative aspect of women's participation. The message of women's empowerment and social development should be clearly sent across the masses. To influence and lead effectively, women representatives must develop and use legitimate power (authority). To empower is giving women the capacity to influence the decision-making process by integrating them into our political system. Hence empowerment of urban as well as rural women can be made possible not only through reservations but it also requires removal of the causes of disempowerment whether social, cultural, economic, political or psychological.



Padma Bhushan Dr (Mrs) V. Mohini Giri, Former Chairperson of the National Commission for Women, Govt. of India, delivering the **Nineth Bharat Ratna Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Lecture** on 08 March, 2011 at India International Centre Annex Auditorium, New Delhi, under the aegis of AGRASRI.