

## Empowerment of Women Representatives in Panchayat Raj Institutions: A Thematic Review

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### Abstract

Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) are viewed as solution to all the problems of rural development and is linked to empowerment of the marginalized section of society, especially women. This paper presents a thematic review on the empowerment of women representatives in PRIs with reference to decentralisation process and the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment in India covering the level of awareness among representatives about panchayat functioning, capacity to take self-decision, participation in community activities, changes in their socio-economic conditions, decision making power at panchayat level and their political participation. The participation of women representatives including members from weaker sections appears to have increased substantially over the years mainly on account of affirmative action. Various studies indicate that women leaders are less corrupt, are able to provide more public goods of equal quality at effective price and consider women's preferences to improve overall governance. On the contrary, studies have also found that women representatives are illiterate; depend on husbands and male officials, especially in taking decisions with regard to village development programmes. The review suggests that the political journey is not smooth for women in a patriarchal and caste-ridden society on account of which women members face a lot of problems in the village panchayat. Women representatives are not comfortable to work at the panchayat level due to dominance of male representatives and they take a longer time to prove their capacity as compared to male representatives. Moreover, it was found that male representatives spend more time on political activities while, women spend more time in carrying out household chores. Overall, affirmative action through 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment has given women and the marginalised communities a sense of empowerment though they are yet to reach an equilibrium level. As assumed by many researchers, in the next decade or so the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women are bound to make further progress in their social status, leadership role, economic position, educational level and, political awareness and attainment.

**Keywords:** Panchayat Raj, Empowerment, Political Participation, Reservation, Women

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## **Introduction**

Democracy ensures empowerment, while Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) guarantees participation of all segments of society in the process. Greater gender equality is the key to successful participation of women in any democracy. Central and state governments have implemented many programmes to provide equal opportunities in education, employment and to improve economic status of women. As a result of this, status of women in India has been subject to many changes over the past two decades. When independence was declared, Mahatma Gandhi observed: 'As long as women of India do not take part in public life there can be no salvation for the country; the dream of decentralization could never be fulfilled. I would have no use for the kind of Swaraj to which such women have not made their full contribution' (Usha, 1999). Gender inequality is a major concern and government of India alongside various state governments have been engaged in a number of intervention programmes aimed at empowering them in true sense.

Empowerment of women is the process of strengthening the economic, social and political status of women in society by which they have dignified and well-regarded life. One of the major interventions used by women empowerment promoters is to empower women through the panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) thereby to ensure their participation in the process of political decision making. The 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment is a milestone mainly for two reasons: a. it facilitated local empowerment and b. it ensured women's empowerment. It provides 33 percent (one third of the total number) reservation in panchayat seats for women. This act also provides reserved seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their population. Same proportions (one third) of the offices of chairpersons of panchayats have been reserved for women. Currently the reservation quota for women is set at 50% at PRIs level.

India has marked the new millennium by pronouncing 2001 as the year of women's empowerment. The gender equality and empowerment of women is considered as one of the important goals (Goal-3) under Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Apart from this, Government of India (GOI) has implemented a project UN Women Programme in the year 2011 with the financial assistance from external agency (UNDP) to promote women's political leadership and gender governance in rural area. The main aim of this programme is to strengthen and enhance equal political participation of women in local PRIs. According to Global Gender Gap Report 2012, the rank of India is 105 out of 135 countries based on the composite index of economic participation, educational attainment, political empowerment, and health and survival (Hausmann, et al 2012). The reservation in local bodies helps women to gain respectful position and to address their issues and concerns, but has not been substantially supported by male society. Women's empowerment still remains a major concern. The reservation of one-third of seats or half of the seats as recently proposed for women in PRIs by itself is not sufficient for their empowerment. In most of the cases, women are housewives and representatives who have entered politics for the first time. Narrow-minded culture, patriarchal society and low levels of education are reasons reported to be responsible for their low political participation in rural local bodies (Rashimi 1997, Dahlerup 2005, Gochhayat 2013).

In this paper, an attempt has been made to present a thematic review on empowerment of women representatives throwing light on the levels of their awareness about the

functioning of panchayats, capacity to take self-decision, participation in community activities, their socio-economic conditions, decision making power at panchayat level and political participation after 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment.

### **Empowerment of Women Representatives of PRIs**

We have completed almost two decades of 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment. Many research works carried out so far, are related to the provision of reservation for women, whether reservation has benefitted their participation in PRIs, whether they are empowered in terms of decision making and independent functioning after entering into panchayat system, are they aware of their role and responsibility, their participation in capacity building programmes, their interests in politics, community activities and panchayat activities, etc.

### **Women Empowerment and Reservation System**

The constitutionally mandated reservations in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) brought in through 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment have ensured women in general and from the marginalised groups in particular to participate in decentralisation process and thereby village and community development. Over and above several region specific Acts enacted by the state governments, the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to Constitution enacted in 1993 is a major strengthening pillar to decentralised process, which recognises the need for uplifting rural women along with other socially, economically and politically weaker sections of the society by making them part of administration and development. Government of India has been trying to achieve empowerment of women through various programmes and constitutional safeguards. Economic empowerment has been targeted or recognised through women component plan, financial assistance to self-help groups, establishment of women operated banks, colleges and universities specifically established for women, social empowerment being cherished through free education to girls up to certain levels, housing schemes, access to services, etc. Political empowerment is assured through reservation of seats for contesting elections at different levels, earmarking of funds under reserved category, etc. In PRIs, the provision of seats has been increased from 33% to 50% for women. Although the experiences in grass root politics over the past two decades do not give us rosy pictures, there are credible incidences of change in rural areas thanks to women's empowerment. These incidences may be a few, but a beginning seems to have been made. In the caste and class ridden society that prevailed for long in India, women's empowerment is emerging in different fields as a result of induced process or affirmative action (Makwana 2012). According to Aiyer (2002), reservations for scheduled castes/scheduled tribes (SCs/STs) are generally working well. And, although there is long way to go in changing the apparent empowerment of women into a real and genuine empowerment, reservation for women has opened the door to revolutionary changes of a political, social and cultural nature by empowering more than one million women through free and fair elections –a unique feature in the world.

Mishra (1997) observed that the reservation of seats for women in PRIs provides them an opportunity to enter into politics and to take active part in the formal political arena which deals with social and economic problems. According to Pai (2001) reservation is helpful to disadvantaged groups and backward classes (OBC) to identify themselves in the local governance and neutralize the upper caste and middle caste dominance. Another study by Hust (2002) examined the political representation and empowerment of women in the local

government institutions in Khurda and Nayagrah districts of Orissa and found that a majority of women candidates had contested for panchayat election through a reservation quota and very few (12.8%) of women contested in election by self-confidence or their own personal qualities.

Duflo and Topalova, (2004) utilized survey data from 'Millennial Survey' which covered 36542 households, 2304 villages in 24 states in the country including the random selection of reserved presidencies for women and they found that in comparison to unreserved Gram Panchayats (GPs), women leaders from reserved panchayats had provided more public goods (drinking water, roads etc.), and quality infrastructure. They observed that people were less likely to be corrupt in these reserved panchayats. A study by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found the reservation system to be helpful for adequate representation of women and for providing adequate delivery of local public goods to disadvantaged groups at the panchayat level. Munshi and Rosenzweig (2008) found that when the effects of caste are accounted for, women are more capable to provide services for their constituencies even though they have less education and experience. They found that reservation also reduces the likelihood that a numerically dominant caste will emerge in any constituency. They pointed out that equity advantage of any reservation system is that it favours historically disadvantaged groups.

Few studies have focused on negative points of reservation system. Palanithurai (1994) revealed that the participants feared that the women from upper caste and wealthy sections would not accept reserved category women and would not like increased number of women representatives from weaker section to local government bodies in Tamil Nadu. Panda (1996) in her study of village panchayats in Orissa found that woman representatives have entered into politics only due to the mandatory provision of reservation or pressure from their family members or their village community. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004<sup>b</sup>) found that women elected to reserved seats are poorer than their male counterparts; they are less experienced, less educated, and less likely to be literate. A study by Narayan (2005) observed that women became members because the seat was reserved for them and not because of their role in public life, and most of them were unknown faces. Nilekani (2010) studied the reservation pattern in Karnataka GP system and found women presidents of GP to be powerless while, male members of their families or vice presidents of GP held the actual power.

Based on their study in Chitradurga district of Karnataka, Nagraj and Pallavi (2013) observed that reservation in PRIs had increased the number of women members and had helped the development of tribal women who had become aware of their voting power, duties and responsibilities of panchayat members and were being supported by their family members. As per the analysis made by Crook and Alan (2001). decentralisation contributed to increased political participation and representation in India and Columbia with mixed outcome in Philippines and poor outcomes in Brazil, Chile, Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria. They observe that the decentralisation process in West Bengal and Karnataka had helped women, SCs and STs to participate in the panchayat activities although the men tended to dominate and both uneducated and SCs and STs were found engaged in meetings, contacting officials, joining associations, sending petitions, etc. An assessment of women's empowerment through GPs made by Chandrashekar and Kadam (2012) in 25 GPs of

Shimoga district in Karnataka reveals entry of young and educated women in to panchayat elections most of them wanting to re-contest. Further, there was improvement in women's social and family status, their contribution to society in terms of public services and developmental initiatives. But, Craig (2001) argues that although decentralisation has improved levels of public participation and accountability, it has done little to reduce rural inequality and poverty. Similarly, Behar and Yogesh Kumar (2002) based on their study of five districts in Madhya Pradesh opine that though constitutional provisions had helped women to move forward and demonstrate their capacities, any attempt to go against male dominance resulted in usurping of power at the ground level.

Despite many efforts to include the weaker sections into the mainstream, discrimination exists in many villages of the country. As put forth by Baviskar and Mathew (2009), although the scenario is changing, discrimination does exist and it could be in terms of making president and panchayat members sit on the floor, keeping aside cup and plates for their use (which are required to be washed by them), creating rift between them and supporting weak SC candidates in election to control him/her after the elections are some of the tactics used by dominant castes. This is because the 'formal institutional arrangements may not adequately reflect the democratisation of a society as there is distinction between making of a democracy and deepening of a democracy' (Jairath and Sajja 2009: 79 quoting Patrick Heller 2000:485). They therefore assign successful implementation of panchayati raj in Kerala and West Bengal to social and land reforms and mass mobilization movements. Satish (2012) in his study of two villages in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh finds caste as a hurdle to the democratic spirit of decentralisation of powers and inclusion of the marginalised groups. So it is the social power that has been identified as element that tries to pull down the very idea of decentralization of political power. Palanithurai (2012) lists around thirty types of discrimination and practices of untouchability against Dalits in four sample villages of Tamil Nadu selected for his study. He found that Dalit women panchayat leaders were not allowed to visit GP office nor preside over gram sabhas. Their husbands were attending to office work as proxies.

Patil (2009) studied the power structure and participation of SCs/STs/other backward castes (OBCs) and women representatives in rural local government in Kolhapur district of Maharashtra. His study found that although women who were housewives had entered politics due to reservations, their role in administration was nominal and they were found to be dependent on their husbands for such activities. Lack of education, knowledge about panchayat administration, poor economic status of members and president enabled the dominant caste people to control GP administration as the latter were largely dependent on dominant castes for agricultural work. The study on dynamics of exclusion and inclusion by Singh (2009) covering panchayat members, officials and villagers in Agra district of Uttar Pradesh reveals that women in Uttar Pradesh have always remained on the periphery, which is due to illiteracy, proxy candidature, low status of women in family and society, early marriage, poverty, burden of domestic chores, etc. He quotes a women president in a sample village who did not know about the number of households in her village, whether panchayat collects taxes, name of block panchayat, her area, etc., all due to her illiteracy, inability and the low status that she faces in her village. However, Singh concludes that reservation had improved the bargaining power of SC women who have been using

panchayats for socio-political gains and are approachable to village women for their problems.

The Citizens' Report on Governance and Development, 2010 based on the review of State Finance Commission, State Election Commission, District Planning Committee and three centrally sponsored programmes viz., Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNURM) concludes that governance is far from effective and there is long way to go before decentralised local governance can produce real gains for the marginalised sections of the society, produce inclusive development and facilitate democratic practice.

In many cases inclusive development is not possible because of lack of awareness about panchayat activities. Rao (2012) from a case study of four villages in Andhra Pradesh finds most of the leaders from the excluded groups to be new entrants who lacked awareness about panchayat Acts, provisions, schemes and projects. Therefore Bhat and Venkat Ravi (2012) stress the need to network among the SCs, STs and women in the PRIs to enable them to share their experiences and, work out combined action plan to realise their needs in an effective manner. Patnaik (2005) found that elected representatives were not able to properly articulate interests specific to their group or even exercise their own judgment in panchayat decision making, which he asserts makes the very notion of representation of the marginalised groups through affirmative action questionable. Based on the study of four GPs in Dhekanal district of Orissa, Patnaik concludes that affirmative action has not ensured the effective representation of the disadvantaged groups in the panchayats in terms of their participation, responsiveness to the interests of villagers and accountability to panchayats.

Das (2013) in his study on Dalit and tribal leadership in Gujarat found that only one-third of the Dalit women were able to win the panchayat elections independently. He finds education, experience in social issues, motivation to bring development to their community, prior performance in panchayats, family support, personal relation with villagers, economic stability and family's political contacts as factors responsible for women to access panchayat positions, which indicates that the road to success is not easy for those without such background. Thorat (2002) also feels that despite several constitutional provisions, the problem of caste-based violations of human rights in modified form continues to persist leading to exploitation of Dalits, especially in rural India as the underclass are yet to be fully politically mobilised against the dominant class.

### **Women Empowerment and Socio-Economic Condition**

Empowerment has several other dimensions like social empowerment, economic empowerment and political empowerment. The importance of socio-economic, psychological and political status of representatives in their entry into panchayat administration cannot be denied as these factors could influence their interests to contest in panchayat election and also their active participation. Vaidya (1997) examined the role of PRIs in women's development for effective participation in decision-making process. Study concluded that the women take a longer time to prove themselves equally capable as men. The psychological empowerment of women representatives have been studied by Narasimhan (1999) who concluded that women representatives had gained awareness

about their responsibilities, information of schemes and motivation by their involvement in panchayat administration. A study by Bhaskar (1997) conducted on women members of 84 GPs in Kerala found that apart from education and land holdings, other variables like age, occupation, and income are crucial for women to enter into politics. Arora and Prabhakar (1997) in their study focused on why some females are more interested in politics and found that women representative who were highly educated and were from upper caste or dominant castes were more interested in politics. They also pointed out that woman representative who often met and discussed with their friends had significant political interest. Hust (2004) and Dahlerup (2005) argue that women representative do not show the possibility of active participation in rural local bodies in India. The study states that most of the women lag behind, because they are uneducated and are dependent on men in rural local bodies. Due to differences in socioeconomic status, occupational choice and family responsibilities in comparison to men, women candidates are likely to have greater difficulties in becoming eligible and aspiring political candidates (Alexander, 2007). Further, Nilekani (2010) found domestic violence against women, wage disparities, sexual harassment and abuse, discrimination in the supplement of nutrition, and low female literacy rates to be widely prevalent in India.

#### **Empowerment of Women through Capacity Building Programme**

Lack of awareness is a key weakness that stands as stumbling block in the development path at panchayat level. In addition, the power and authority of upper caste communities also restrict the SC/ST women elected representatives to perform their roles and responsibilities at panchayat level. In some parts of India, SC/ST representatives are denied to enter the panchayat office and when they win the election, they are denied to take charge of the office or sit in their seat. The voice of SC/ST women is not fully represented in the political ground. The achievement of gender equity and equality is one of the major challenges in Indian society. The empowerment of SC and ST women has emerged as an important aspect of the ongoing socio-economic and political transformation in India. Efforts have been made to empower the GP women representatives through imparting training. Capacity building programmes are felt necessary as most of the SC/ST women elected representatives are found to be illiterate and have only primary school level education.

Although social inequalities are fading under the provisions made under the Constitution of India and the public policies aimed at inclusive development, the capacity building programmes can help members, particularly women belonging to SC, ST and Other Backward Castes (OBC) to fight against the disadvantages and enable them to participate in the local government process with confidence. The Expert Committee on Leveraging Panchayats For Efficient Delivery of Public Goods and Services (2013) in its report 'Towards Holistic Panchayat Raj: Twentieth Anniversary Report' states that 'it is not an absence of political will that is making panchayat raj stumble so much as the unevenness of panchayat raj outcomes that is stalling the evolution of the required political will'. And, deficiencies in capacity-building contribute to their sense of helplessness. Even when some training is imparted, much of this training bears little resemblance to the tasks that panchayat representatives are permitted to undertake in the absence of effective devolution. There being little integration between the line departments and the panchayats, many, perhaps, most panchayat representatives get little opportunity for hands-on learning on the job. Moreover, line department officials are rarely trained to work in consultation with PRIs. On

the contrary, the atmosphere in most line departments discourages the evolution of a working relationship with elected representatives, except perhaps at the 'sarpanch' level.

Baviskar and Mathew (2009) based on the case studies from 12 states on local governance stated that 'India is on the crest of transformation. In the next decade or so the SCs, STs and women are bound to make further progress in their social status, leadership role, economic position, educational level and political awareness. This will enable them to claim and acquire a legitimate share in the power structure. Local government is only the beginning and for many it is a nursery of leadership. With elections every five years a churning process has begun'. But, is this possible with only creamy layer of SC/STs getting benefits of reservation and the poorest unaware of the development schemes (Jairath and Sajja 2009), loans, scholarships, etc. There is a need to increase facilities in education viz. hostels, 100% free school education, bus pass, books and uniforms, etc. Awareness and access to information are necessary for transparency in local government (Jairath and Sajja, 2009).

According to Joshi (2009), there is a total lack of understanding about the provisions of the panchayat Act among SCs, STs and women representatives. Aiyer (2002) states that the arrangement for training of elected members of the panchayat at different levels and of administrative and technical staff attached to panchayats fall far short of requirement at present. He argues for an exponential increase in the quantum of funds made available for such training as well as deep consideration to the overall training requirements of both elected members and panchayat staff. According to Aiyer, there is no need to concentrate on training programmes for the weaker sections and women as IGNOU has evolved a multi-media model for extending training on a mass scale through the use of both traditional and innovative forms of mass communication. One needs to test the efficacy of these methods as it is also necessary to have personal touch and proximity while addressing the needs of vulnerable groups who are hesitant to come forward. Behar and Aiyer (2003) based on ground experience of the working of panchayats strongly highlight the continued need for effective capacity building among members of panchayat.

The State Training Institutes conduct training programme for panchayat representatives in different states regularly. Some NGOs and private institutes are also organizing training programmes to help GP women representatives to become more self-confident and to impart knowledge about their role and responsibility. Mahi Pal (2003) and Vyasulu's (2004) work focus on empowerment of women representatives through capacity building programmes. They conclude that capacity building/training programme is very important to women representatives for understanding their role and responsibilities, mobilization of own resources; preparation of action plan, budget, and sharing their experiences. Narayan (2005), studied capacity building programmes for the elected representatives at the GP level of three states (Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh) in India. He observed that many panchayat representatives got acquainted with their powers, responsibilities, functions and limitation through capacity building programmes. In addition, the membership in SHGs and political parties was an important factor as PRIs were often discussed in the meetings of these organizations. Majority of reserved women representatives were dependent on their sons or husbands to understand the rules and procedures of PRIs in Madhya Pradesh. They had low levels of awareness as compared to men therefore their participation in schemes/programmes, development planning was found to be lower than the men at the local level.



### **Women Representatives and Decision-Making Power**

According to UNDP 'development can be inclusive - and reduce poverty - only if all groups of people contribute to creating opportunities, share the benefits of development and participate in decision-making' (www.undp.org). Inclusive development ensures the participation of marginalised and excluded groups in the development process, wherein they become one of the stakeholders. Decentralization fits in to inclusive development structure as it itself is a model of development, which enables empowerment and upliftment of the marginalized and the poor guaranteed by institutional framework. The affirmative actions of the governments enable their participation. The very purpose of decentralisation is to develop plans for activities at the local level with the participation of all the sections of the community represented through the voices, for example *gram sabha* in India. Since decentralisation facilitates democratic governance that is representative, accountable, transparent and accessible to the public, it is likely to embrace inclusive development. It has been introduced in countries across the world as a mechanism to improve governance and service delivery.

The National Policy on Education, Government of India (1986) states that, 'Women become empowered through collective reflection and decision-making. Its parameters are building a positive self-image and self-confidence, developing the ability to think critically, building up group cohesion and fostering decision-making and action; ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change; encouraging group action in order to bring about change in the society; providing the wherewithal for economic independence'. Empowerment of SC and ST women representatives is aimed at enabling them to think and act freely, exercise their choice to fulfill their in the interests of the community at large and give better service to people without any hesitation.

The United Nations Development Programme (1996) adopted gender perspectives in development goals, which includes a commitment to promoting the empowerment of women in political and economic decision-making at all levels from the rural local bodies to national government. It suggested that empowerment is promoted through increasing women's decision-making powers, the support for income generating activities and provision of skills and education to women. Behar and Kumar (2002) studied decentralization in Madhya Pradesh through a survey of 60 GPs from five districts of Madhya Pradesh. Their study found that in most of the cases, the decision to contest for elections for women representatives was taken by their husbands, father-in-law or brothers. They observed that whenever the seat was declared as reserved for women, the husband of women representative, ex- panch (member) or ex-sarpanch (president) of panchayat, decided to contest women representatives. According to them the dependency on husband is necessary because most of the women representatives are unable to handle public affairs mainly because of their illiteracy, lack of confidence, awareness or experience, and general isolation from public life.

### **Women Empowerment and Political Participation**

Political participation rates are an indicator of governmental legitimacy, citizens' support for a democratic form of government, and the sense of collective responsibility and civic duty that are associated with consolidated and stable democracies as expressed by Desposato and Norrander (2005). According to Mansuri and Rao (2013) decentralization strengthens

citizens' participation in local government by instituting regular elections, improving access to information by fostering mechanisms for deliberative decision making on the demand side and enhances the ability of local governments to provide services by increasing their financial resources, strengthening the capacity of local officials and streamlining and rationalizing administrative functions. Political participation is essential for any representative/leader of the people.

Democracy implies equality for all human beings, men and women. Equal treatment to women in political life, to be meaningful and effective should start from the grassroots level. Political journey is not smooth for women GP members in a patriarchal and caste-ridden society. Bhaskar (1997), Besley, Pande, and Rao (2007) found that the political membership and their families' political history are helpful for women to enter into politics. Palanithurai (1994) pointed out that women members face lot of problems in the village panchayats of Tamil Nadu. The male members sometimes do not cooperate with elected women ward members and it is generally a difficult task for women to balance their housework and their duties as an elected official. Rashimi (1997) pointed out that in most of the cases women are housewives and representatives who entered first time into politics and most of them are illiterate or educated up-to primary level. Burns et al (2001) found that while men representatives spent more time on political participation, women spent more time on housework in a day and women representatives had little time for political participation.

Finally the scholars like Mishra (1999) and Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2003) have used the word '*political proxy*' for the women representative who is vested only with the formal power while the real power still resided with the male members of their family. Another study by Kulkarni (2011) observed that women representatives are not comfortable in working at the panchayat level due to presence of large number of male representatives and officials in Maharashtra and Gujarat. This poses challenges to women to come out and speak in open and participate in public activities. The study noticed that the factors which constrain women to participate in the local governance include design of the programmes taken up by GPs, which are handled comfortably by men rather than women, the rules for membership of associations which allow more male participation, lack of support from the household, women's own under estimation of their skills and capacities to perform, holding meetings when women are at work in the field or when they are busy with domestic work.

Few studies discussed building of political career in the local bodies by women. Vaidya (1997) observed change in behaviour and attitudes among rural women after their entry into politics. Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar (2002) pointed out that a majority of male presidents wanted to pursue a political career and they thought panchayat president-ship was the first step in this direction. But, a majority of female presidents did not aspire for any political career and were doubtful about their repeated participation. So there are significant differences between expectations of male president and female president and also their attitudes regarding political involvement at the panchayat level. Duflo and Topalova, (2004) pointed out that people were less satisfied with the public goods provided by the women leaders and it was the main reason for women rarely winning elections even though they were effective leaders in the GP.

Kaushal (2010) states that women are politically marginalized in India and are capable of providing good service to the people and show good leadership quality if they are given time, support, resources, training and freedom to work. A study by Gochhayat (2013) on 125 women respondents from five GPs of Hindol Block in Dhenkand district of Odisha found political participation of women in the functioning and the electoral process of panchayats as not satisfactory. A parochial culture, patriarchal society and low levels of education were responsible for women's backwardness in political participation. A study by Rai (2013) considered nine concepts for evaluating the impact of gender quota in the political empowerment of women, which included political knowledge, political interest, political participation, political trust, political contacts, political protests, attitude towards the role of gender, public projects and confidence. This study revealed that the gender quota had a very positive impact on the political knowledge of women as most of the elected women representatives had good knowledge about the political activities and panchayat works, which in turn enthused these women to become more interested in political works.

'In spite of constitutional rights and positive outcomes reported elsewhere, there are reports about continued resistance to women's power with incidences of backlash and violence and efforts to unseat them through no confidence motions' (Sharma 1998; Ramesh and Ali 2001). Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar (2002) based on their study on participation of women in Karnataka reveal that although there was enhanced representation and improvement in political status of women in local government, it had not translated into effective outcomes due to gender and other social differences. In the sense, they lacked power to execute works as active participation of women was not tolerated by men. Chhetri (2012) in his study on Sikkim found low participation of women in gram sabha, but as per the perceptions of the officials, he assumes that there is no proxy representation. The level of awareness about panchayati raj was also not wide spread. The study by Vidya (1997) shows that female representatives in Karnataka were better informed as compared to representatives in Haryana. However, everything is not dismal. Despite the social resistance, Das (2013) identifies Dalit panchayat functionaries who used their rights to grow into role models in many villages across India.

### **Conclusion**

The participation of women, especially those belonging to weaker sections, in GPs has increased after the implementation of 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment. The participation of women representatives including members from weaker sections appears to have increased substantially over the years mainly on account of affirmative action. But, the political journey is not smooth for women in a patriarchal and caste-ridden society on account of which they face a lot of problems in the village panchayat.

The review of literature suggests that affirmative action by the government across the world has brought in significant changes in rural political life (Aziz 2000, Chattopadhyay and Dufflo, 2007) though there are a few studies, which claim that reservation or affirmative action has not resulted in desired outcome either because women are proxy by their spouses or children or by powerful political interests in the case of SC/ST candidates and due to differences that exists between communities at local level (Pai 2001). The fact that women are proxied by their husbands or other influential persons in the village is also brought out by others (Mohanty 2009; Singh 2009; Jairath and Sajja 2009; Ramesh Kumar

2001; Bhargava and Subha 2009 (in some cases); Sivanna 2012; Das 2013). However, in cases where there is limited influence of decentralisation on women's empowerment, upliftment of reserved categories and minorities, overtime the affirmative actions are expected to enable these groups to assert themselves more effectively (Manor 1999).

Further the review points out that women are less corrupt (Baviskar and Mathew 2009) as against its high prevalence or failure to prevent it earlier (Chakraborty and Bhattacharya 1993; Vyasalu and Vysalu, 1999) and they try to provide basic services in the villages and attend to the needs of women (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Sivanna 2012). Their participation in the local government facilitated by affirmative action has led to inclusiveness and empowered them politically (Jairath and Sajja 2009; Das 2013) (though only a minority of them have gained in several forms) and economically and improved their self-confidence and social status. Due to such action the number of women in panchayats has also increased although it does not guarantee their participation (Kundu 2009). Education and social background of the members are found to be the factors motivating empowerment and participation while poverty and continuity of faithfulness to the dominant castes are obstacles (Baviskar 2009; Jairath and Sajja 2009). There are also evidences that political interests and social influences restrict entry of some women into politics, affect decisions on who should participate and their continued participation (Ananthpur 2004; Mukhopadhyay 2005). The literature indicates that real empowerment is possible only when the marginalised viz. SCs/STs and women influence decision making, which is a sign of their being included overcoming their earlier state of exclusion (Bhaviskar and Mathew 2009). However, no major improvement was found in the living conditions of the Dalit in GPs with Dalit presidents (Palanithurai 2012) and their inclusion in political sphere did not make much difference to their individual or community lives (Satish Kumar 2012).

The fact that the dependence of weaker sections on the dominant castes in village for labour and financial needs makes them submissive and non-asserting in the case of panchayat activities has been discussed and identified by researchers (Joshi 2009, Patil 2009). There is demand for creating employment avenues, distribution of land rights, creating capacity to learn and participate, organising and networking among women members, etc. Majority of the studies stressed the need for capacity building among elected representatives as many members are new entrants and illiterates (Bhat and Venkat Ravi 2012; Rao 2012; Aiyer 2002; Raghunandan 2012; Palnithurai 2012; Sivanna 2012). Many studies indicate that reservation has given the marginalised communities a sense of empowerment though they are yet to reach an equilibrium level. In the next decade or so the SCs, STs and women are bound to make further progress in their social status, leadership role, economic position, educational level and political awareness (Baviskar and George 2009). Overall there is still a long way to go for achieving the objectives of the 73rd amendment. Since the motion has already been set in right direction with mandated guidelines and provisions, one can hope for positive outcomes in the years to come.

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