

Local Governance, Elections & Women Leaders in Maharashtra

The constitution bill – 73rd amendment, 1992 providing constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions was passed by the Parliament and came into effect on April 24, 1993.

Some of the salient features of the Act are as follows:

- The Gram Sabha will be a body comprising of all the adult members registered as voters in the Panchayat area.
- There shall be a three-tier system of Panchayats at the village level, at the intermediary level and at the district level.
- At all the three levels, seats will be filled by direct election. In all the Panchayats, seats should be reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population and one-third of the total number of seats should be reserved for women. Among the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, one –third should also be reserved for women. Now it is 50% in Maharashtra and even in other states.
- Every panchayat shall have a five year term and the election of the Gram Panchayats will be conducted under the rules and regulations as laid by Election Commission of India.
- Specific responsibilities will be entrusted to the Panchayats to prepare plans for the economic development and promotion of social justice in respect of matters listed in schedule eleven.
- The Panchayat will receive adequate funds for carrying out their functions, Panchayats will be permitted to collect and retain the revenue they raise.

The state of Maharashtra already had the Maharashtra Gram Panchayat Act, 1958 which was amended as per the directions of the Central Government through the 73rd Amendment Act, 1993, according to the Constitutional status in Maharashtra.

There are CERTAIN major limitations perceived in the functioning of PRI in Maharashtra. They are as follows:

- Provision of the motion of no-confidence against the Sarpanch who can be removed for misconduct has been abused, mainly against women Sarpanchs, who are competent.
- No action is taken to distribute the net proceeds of taxes, fees, duties, tolls, etc. levied by then State to the local body under the Finance Commission established on 29th April, 1994.
- The Gram Sabha has not been given autonomy in real sense to approve and sanction the annual budget and development programs, under schedule XI. Devolution of functions & functionaries is incomplete.
- Taxation provisions laid down under the act are not followed nor enacted leading to financial crunch.

- Gram Sevak as the secretary of the panchayat to facilitate the functions of the panchayat have taken over as the executives due to lack of awareness and skills for governance amongst the Panchayat members.
- The number of Mahila Gram Sevaks (women secretaries) who could be effective role holders for the women Sarpanchs is very less.

In general, PRI process has become secondary because of the on paper participation of people, and this problem deserves serious attention, particularly in view of the fact that the empowerment of voters is an important objective in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment which has renewed national interest in grassroots governance.

The 73rd constitutional amendment led to Gram Panchayats in India receiving the constitutional status of being autonomous local governments. The responsibility to determine the path for village development and the policies therein and also participation, in the decision making process for implementation of schemes for individual progress has become mandatory for every stakeholder in the village. However, grassroots observation has shown that the customary traditions & power structures existing in a village society have ensured that the poor, less educated, the deprived and the womenfolk still hesitate to approach the Gram Panchayat. Needy citizens have less access to Panchayat.

While working with women in Panchayati Raj, the addictions plaguing the system were visible. In 2015, a European Union report spoke of these ills.

The first ailment is that of negligible people's participation! Today in a village, one finds associations, organizations, governments and various other campaigns working. Barring civil society, interventions from outside the village are increasing. Getting the local village population to explicitly contribute to village development is a serious challenge.

The second ailment is the upper class dominance. The wealthy folks want the authority in the village for themselves. At the same time the government is also unwilling to loosen its hegemony over village governance. They say the local self-governments are autonomous, but they aren't given enough liberty.

The third apparent illness is how the gram Panchayats today act as centres to do the State government's bidding. They are given absolutely no discretion to exercise their decision-making role. In the village level, beyond the central and state government's policies and missions there is an illusion of autonomy. They say a Gram Panchayat is the decision making body for a village's development, but that is not visible in practice. They have converted it as a service-delivery centre.

The fourth ailment would be the lack of an audit to measure the policy and subsequent implementation. Since the 73rd amendment various policy interventions are seen to have been made on paper. But whether they have been implemented in reality and are in practice is not audited. The policies are all great, but how can the implementation gap be reduced, is the pertinent question. Understanding these gaps will help in finding effective solutions.

The fifth illness is the lack of inclusiveness in the Panchayati Raj as an Institution. The inclusion of the dalit, the disabled, the tribal, the minority, the migrants, the displaced sections children and the women in the development and the decision making process is almost absent. Without understanding the relationship between the power-centres and the internal dynamics within caste groups and class hierarchies, an attempt to implement developmental policies is being made. Understanding the core of the exploitation of deprived sections at the panchayat level, may be required to prepare the future blueprint for inclusive village development.

The sixth illness is that the government officials and people's representatives don't possess the live desire to learn new things& innovations. The political& administrative will to accept new experiments that can take the village and the society ahead seems missing. Today, the village society has various interventions like the associations, organizations and self-help groups standing tall. But the government is unwilling to accept their ideas. The government must acknowledge their contribution and try to scale and universalize their successes. But no matter how great the intervention, the government is unwilling to accept them and this is the reality. It is essential that if a certain intervention has been identified to enhance public good, it must be adapted within an official policy. NGO's have evolved many forms of information dissemination and training, but acceptance is minimum.

The final illness which is the obvious reluctance of the governments to collaborate with civil society organizations. It can be seen that they keep these organizations at the maximum distance possible from themselves. It looks like the government machinery has developed a mentality, that collaborating with volunteer& organizations translates directly to taking on their issues and problems. Questioning is like a crime & tolerance is an award!

In order to increase inclusive participation in the decision making process of the Gram Panchayat, it is imperative that all have optimum knowledge of the policies, programmes and procedures that govern it. For example, Panchayat Mahila Shakti Abhiyan – PMSA has tried a novel experiment of Gram Panchayat Darshan. This was for clarity regarding the technicalities concerning the administrative methods of the Panchayat and for awareness regarding the roles and responsibilities of the elected representatives, a local learning tour of the Panchayat or a 'Gram Panchayat Reality tour' can be organized for the village folk, who constitute the Gram Sabha. This can easily be the 'Zero Budget' provision of the Gram Panchayat. There can be no ambiguity in this regard! Why must a certain governmental machinery exist in the village? Only when the local stakeholders learn the workings of their village Panchayat there can be effective participation in the Gram Sabhas. This is the core objective of this project.

This was very useful process to discuss how the Panchayat impacts the daily lives of the people & to understand how the panchayat plans and makes provisions for village development. After determining the suitable date and time for the tour of the Gram Panchayat, the Panchayat must be presented with a formal written request for the same. During the tour, the participants must be informed to collect in-depth knowledge about every topic they are introduced to, without fail. The tour could end with an open panel discussion with the Gram Panchayat Sarpanch (President), the Panchayat members and the Gramsevak (Secretary). The participants should be advised to report

their observations during this discussion. After this discussion an exhaustive blueprint of the issues and subsequent schemes can be prepared.

What exactly will be the result of this tour be? It will result in people's familiarity with the Gram Panchayat processes, increased dialogue between elected representatives and the general public, increased communication between the people and the panchayat, Panchayat will be more approachable and people won't hesitate to approach the Panchayat for issues that plague them daily.

What exactly will we achieve through this Gram Panchayat tour campaign? People will understand the administration of the gram panchayat from within; their participation in the workings of the panchayat will increase. There will be an increase in numbers at the gram sabhas and the deprived sections, including women, in the village will start getting active in rural governance. The traditional notions about the Gram Panchayat will be reconsidered; it will help women and the deprived have greater chance at being treated equally and the deprived sections will feel empowered as a group.

Today, we as facilitators in Panchayati Raj don't just do the work of critiquing but also undertake concrete strategies towards the various options available that will solidify the existing grassroot democracy through Panchayati Raj structure. A lot of times only problems are identified. But we find alternatives to these problems through our experiences in action. We ourselves have been facing these ills for the past twenty years along with the Elected Women Representatives. The 50% reservation for women has made matters easier to a certain extent. But the challenges mentioned above are still a serious concerns. The important factor is the people of the panchayat! Only when the chasm between the Panchayat and the people is breached, can the challenges be overcome. For this a village citizen must take the first step on his own free will! And for that to happen, the 'Gram Panchayat institution visit' program should be implemented across the State, by the Government.

Through a study tour of the Gram Panchayat the people will learn the language of governance. While working in the midst of people, the language used and the understanding shared between us plays an important role. Is the language used in government orders and circulars comprehensible to the common person? The reality before us is that extremely deprived sections of people exist in the Panchayat. How to emancipate them from their daily exploitation and integrate them in the development process is something the Panchayat must find solutions for. While considering the capacity development of the human capital in the Gram Panchayat, it is necessary to consider these deprived sections too. A uni-dimensional view of ideas and actions for development will not do well while working with the Panchayat. Taking everyone along should be the Panchayat's comprehensive project. The little hamlets surrounding the cities are slowly being absorbed into the city. As the village transforms into a part of the city, various new challenges emerge. One must pay attention to these challenges and look for alternatives. The autonomy based perspective while considering human capital is seen to be missing at the village level. Each person only thinks of jobs and personal gains as they pave the way for change. Today India dreams of becoming 'Digital India'. But there has been no deliberation on twenty-four hour internet service will be made available to the inhabitants of Nandurbar and Dhule in the Vindhya Ranges of

Konkanand North Maharashtra. All of the services of the Gram Panchayat are now online, but how will this impact village that face load-shedding due to electricity shortages and have no internet service, is something that requires practical deliberation. When one plans for the inclusive development of Marathwada, these plans are often cloaked in the state government's carelessness and the people's negativity. Even though the people of Marathwada are still struggling to meet their basic needs, there needs to be a positive search for solutions for Marathwada's development. In the areas of tribal self-governance, the rules and regulations of the PESA Gram Panchayat have been prepared, but even that is not seen to be strictly enforced.

While considering the human capital in the Gram Panchayat, the matter of the transfer of the 29 subjects in Addendum 11 of the State and Central list should be devolved through policy. As done in Kerala, all 29 subjects should be handed over to the Panchayats. All the problems and challenges at the Panchayat level must be dealt with by everyone together. At least those organizations and associations that work in Panchayati Raj should unite to work for democracy in the grassroots. The finance, functions and functionaries of the Panchayat are equally important and they shouldn't be thought of separately. To keep the democratic system in the grassroots moving, State must think of all three components together. After 25 years of 73rd amendment, women are facing many challenges.

Women in local self-governance are facing core challenges like –

- They become the victim of REMOTE control. People call this process as Sarpanch Pati, Putra or Pita. (it means proxy representation by Husband, Son or Father of Elected Women head).
- Budget phobia is the second challenge for a woman, who does not understand beyond her family budget.
- Capable and effective women face the challenge of "Character assassination". This is the cheap tool of harassment.
- Status of decentralization is on paper. Women believe on this basic principle but due to Direct Sarpanch Election, process of centralization is strengthened.
- Lastly Election is THE "KEY" or Lock towards the transparent governance. Election is become complex process.

Reality of Proxy representatives is very obvious, all over India. A prospective corporator came to visit after switching political parties. She started speaking about how she thought the candidates should be fielded. The gentleman husband, who facilitated the switch, made his position absolutely forthright; "Sir, we want to bring Gandhi home. That's exactly why we want to make madam (his wife) the corporator. We will speak of Gandhiji's ideals in the speeches, but in reality, the more currency with Gandhi's portrait you possess, the greater the number of elections you can contest."

How contradictory is this picture of modern democracy? If one must explain democracy in the simple words of Saint Tukdoji Maharaj;

Democracy means the interest of the people,
Must work through people in no time,
All stakeholders must speak the truth,
Must recognize their responsibilities ..1..
Only that can be called democracy,
Where no one is idle,
All are eager to serve,
A just public..2..

Now if one must search for a just public, where does one begin? The alliance between the candidates who offer bribes and the voters, who accept, is getting stronger. With the certainty that no elected representative will come to them for the next five years, the people auction off their mandate once and for all. They make-up for five years' worth of recovery in one breath in the beginning and then stay silent for the rest of that period! The elected representatives themselves, in the pomp of having done a deal, then feel free to do as they please. Who will break the tie-up between a mute citizenry and unrestrained candidates? In this mega market for votes, the penniless women loose themselves despite the reservations instituted. Fed up of getting lost in and losing in political games, she readies herself to quit governance in frustration. Things play out exactly how the practitioners of this "patriarchal power" politics wish it to. Recently I visited Bangladesh. There, even today they employ people to fan the elected representatives. Until the meeting of the Panchayat is over, each representative is fanned by a person using traditional hand fans. The elected female representative quietly sits in a corner dressed in a hijab. She probably has a lot to say. But this oppressive environment with a 'personal fanner' keeps her silent at every step. The voters also don't find this to be off. The usual problems of corruption, meat, alcohol and vows during elections, exist there as well. An open environment and oppression is a quandary that exists.

Recently in London, experiments found that tomato plants could produce potatoes as well. The plant that provides both tomatoes and potatoes is the mentality of the voters today. They want the bribe the candidate offers, and they also expect to receive all benefits possible in their five years in power. Their state is like that of the tomato fruit. Once their votes have been bought, they value for the voter ends after. They can't then expect to receive their rights as conscious citizens of the republic.

Which is why today our democracy consists of dealings by the leadership. An auction of the caste based vote happens in every street. One village-one lamb, one vote-one note, one slum- friend of the displacement or one society –a beautiful colour palette; thus various such policies have their unofficial pandemonium going on. It was only during our interaction with voters were we taken aback. In such a political climate, there still exist a number of voters who proudly claim, "I do not sell my vote." They express their complete trust in the democratic process. For the rights of the voters, they remain alert day and night. They make sincere efforts to strengthen the constitution and the four pillars upholding the constitution.

Among the voters one will surely find the followers of Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, who constantly said, "Those holding the udders of reason must unite". I felt like his consciousness will lend much needed support to women's participation in governance. Some women even confessed

that they offer their past errors to the Ganges, but in the future they wouldn't stand for making a marketplace out of their votes. They will not allow five years' worth of rights to go down the drain for one pink note! What pink note compares to the one thousand eight hundred and twenty five days in 5 years! I have a right over every minute of these days, then why must I let it go? Why must I bestow it on the politician?

They also opined that there was a need for not only personal vows, but there should be a strong union of clean, transparent and self-respecting voters – it should be beyond personal political leanings, value democracy, poor-centric, encourage systemic scholarship and united.

These voters, who are swimming against the current, don't want to use the method of force. They pay their respects to all the agitations that resulted in a free electorate and cast their vote of their own free will. Political science is truly a science where the government machinery reflects and thinks about the past, present and future.

A clean electorate is the solid backbone of this science and governmental machinery. They are fighting the battle that will lead to the extinction of political asymmetry. Along with the women workers of this movement, various other people have come forward to support this trek. A poet once said, that the flowers that bloom in a garden, first belong to the garden and then to the branch in which is blossomed. Similarly, our votes first belong to our society and then to us individuals. The verse is as follows...

First, the flower is of the garden',
Then, of the branch.

My singular vote, can make what sort of an impact on the elected candidates? The candidate could win the elections or lose the elections. Sometimes, a government can fall due to a single vote, but can also ascend power through a single vote. It is important that every voter must be convinced of the power their vote has. If the other important aspect of how my vote will impact my living, livelihood, health, education, society, economy and governance is strung together, it is obvious that democracy is deep rooted in my well-being. Because no matter what the issue, it cannot be solved without governance! We face new problems on a daily basis. We live in the era of technology. What was previously done by 500 labourers can now be done by a machine in 10 minutes. This has increased unemployment, made education expensive. The crops that grow through the usage of the new fertilizers don't have the original nutrient composition. Because of which bodies aren't as immune anymore. The markets are flooded with imported goods. Addictions have increased. Having no honest means to livelihood, our youth and poor have taken to thieving and dacoity. Everyone is looking out for their families, whatever will keep the home fires burning. Cases of atrocities are on the rise, fights among castes, which result in cases like the Khairlanji and Beed incidents. Women and girls face attacks daily. A daughter isn't safe with her father anymore. Babas and Bapus have played with young girl's lives. There exist so many 'bapus' like AsaramBapu still persecutes women and young girls. The superstitions widespread in society must be removed. In this the mainstream media must play a pivotal role! But, on the contrary T.V shows constantly portray women to have succumbed to superstitions. They only show the importance of Gods and Goddesses.

Instead of showing people the "truth", effects of the intensification of religious zeal is evident now. In reality, we need elected representatives who tear-up, when a citizen's feet is stung by a thorn. That is the level of sensitivity that one needs in today's elected representatives. This is a dire need.

And if the men & women voter has sold themselves and accepted money in return for votes then, we become an example for valueless society. For meat, alcohol and jobs as promised, people lose the right to call them a representative of the people!! If all practice this in the elections then in India, the voters will be enslaved and in turn values of democracy will be enslaved without doubt. This challenge of valueless election has to be reversed at the earliest. Women Leaders have proved themselves as a potential politician who can transform & add democratic values towards people centred governance. Value addition by women in Panchayats is an important & empowering subject for the study.

The value addition of women to 73rd Constitutional Amendment is the ultimate goal of bringing about a process towards electoral transformation whereby governance is a priority based service to the society, rather than a determining factor. Wherein individuals and groups are treated as persons with dignity and justice, and not discriminated against on the basis of sex, caste, class or creed in their social, economic, political and cultural spheres of their living situation.

The power-structure operating in present-day politics relegates woman to a subordinate role wherein she is confined to household duties, takes care of the family members and preserves the cultural and religious traditions of the family or caste. She has no role to play outside the family in other matters relating to the governance of society, irrespective of the fact that she could be as an individual is better qualified to be in societal governance.

Thus, the patriarchal system in the society legitimizes the control of man over woman in the areas of culture, tradition, resources and religion. Woman preserves these, but man has monopolized its governance. He is the head of the family, controller of the resources, and ultimately the final decision-maker. The seat of power rests with man because of his gender status irrespective of the fact that whether he is equitably qualified for the same than a woman. And woman has a secondary role because of her gender status irrespective of the fact that she could be more sensitive to be in the seat of governance role.

The value addition to this social reality is to transform the inter-relationships of man-woman in panchayat to be based on Gender Equity as persons rather than gender-role as dictated in a patriarchal system of governance.

In the larger context, causes of woman's poverty and absolute poverty fall into two categories: those which result from belonging to families that are poor; and those which relate to woman's subordination within the family, the Panchayat, the community, and the wider social-political-cultural spheres. Though she is expected to take care of the family needs, she has no right to family property, access to community/village resources which is under the control of male-dominated governance. Even her right to livelihood depends on the 'graciousness' of male-members in the family or the community.

The value addition to the economic reality is – Panchayat must respect her individual right to own property, and to claim her right to usage of village property, assets and resources against the individual appropriation of community resources such as water resources, village land, grazing land, forest produce etc. which is under the control of the powerful section (usually male-dominated) of the society today.

The rural vote-bank plays a crucial role in deciding the political power of the state. Those who hold political power can control the resources of the nation by legislation and by executive orders. Man as the controller of resources in the society keeps this control to preserve his hegemony over woman as well as the governance of the resources.

Patriarchy, kinship, religion and caste being successful in getting women elected, they are yet treated as proxies. Untrained and less exposed for political and public affairs, diffident and ignorant of their powers, rights and privileges, the newly elected panchayat women members are not able to perform the tasks expected of them and deliver the goods, particularly in the context of policy making. Besides, society governed by men treats women's issues as women's issues and not as societal issues. There is a need for women to be involved in large numbers to induce confidence and voice their issues to be taken as societal issues. This is possible in Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) where women being half the population can voice their demands to be taken up and decide on the same.

The value addition to this political process in local self-governance is to bring in participatory democracy of the people, by the people and for the people, wherein people's right to participatory governance rather than only representative governance at the village level is recognised. This nurturing of participatory democracy in Gram Sabha enhances the status of women in the community and low income groups as part of the governance process. A collective empowerment towards social change process is "added" to the movement whereby gender issues are prevented from being marginalised.

The rise of cultural hegemonies of the majority dominant groups are a threat to the traditional pluralistic culture of India where all religions, culture, traditions, customs are respected and also integrated as one "Indian Culture". This is a threat to India, which divides & spread hatred against the one-another.

The need for a secularist nature in our polity is all the more important to become One India, One Country, One People, marching towards progress and prosperity. Secularism is a "system where transactions are conducted between individuals as well as between individuals and institutions without being prejudiced by either party's religious beliefs, and where equal opportunity is available for every individual irrespective of his or her religious or caste affiliations. Further, it is the right of every individual to seek solace and peace of mind and to derive moral sustenance, hope and courage from any source".

"A democracy works best in an environment of pluralism, respect for the opinion of others and where there is freedom to practise one's own beliefs! We need to create a mind-set that highlights

the commonness of our beliefs rather than differences. A democracy based on such principles will be vibrant, and enthuse, energize and encourage citizens to integrate rather than create fissions.

This is the value addition by the 73rd Amendment, whereby villages are assumed as autonomous Community, One People (whether man or woman) and all without being discriminated against by sex, creed, caste or religion, are involved as One Community to become Actors of their own Development. It also strives for a pluralistic culture which can sustain and envelope all towards progress as a democratic country and which respects personal freedom of the individual or groups.

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