

## Study on the Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institution

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**ABSTRACT** Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantage section of the society like schedule caste, schedule tribes and women. The present study was an effort to know the extent of participation of women elected representative in Panchayat and the problems faced by them. Sample consisted of 33 women elected representatives from two Districts of Jammu and Kathua. Purposive sampling technique was adopted for selecting the sample from different blocks. The tool used for obtaining information was an Interview Schedule. The findings of the study revealed that neither the reservation for women or their actual presence in the Panchayat have become any more sensitive to the problems related to the village women. The women who are elected are not always treated with due respect. Many elected women complained that their suggestions were not considered seriously nor were they consulted while decisions were being made. Some felt that their views were ignored only because they are women. At times they were pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions made by the male dominated Panchayats.

### INTRODUCTION

Panchayati Raj is not a new phenomenon in the country. Its illustration in history goes back to more than a 1000 years. It has its roots in Ancient Indian Institutions when the villages were little republics governed by their Panchayats. During this period, it was not that women could not join politics, but the fact was that they did not take interest in it due to a patriarchal set up. The British through their ruthless method of revenue collection and the introduction of zamindari land tenure system almost destroyed these ancient republics and as well the involvement of women in politics. The British were of the view that "Vote of Women" would be premature in the Indian Society and continued to enforce purdah and prohibition against women's education. (Bhagat 2005).

After Independence, despite having a constitution, which embodies lofty, ideals like equity and equality, social justice could not be achieved so far. Even when India had a woman Prime Minister for quite a number of years, the situation of women at large did not change for the better. Women's participation in politics remained quite insignificant in India even after 59 years of self-rule. (Nanda 2006)

From October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1959 when the first

Panchayati Raj was inaugurated, on April 24, 1993 after the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act came into force it has been an uncertain and undulating journey for Panchayats.

The structure and process of Panchayats are equally pivotal as they bring to bear and entitle role member therein to perform. If the overall scenario of Panchayats was largely despairing, another disquieting aspect is that almost one half of rural population was virtually kept out of Panchayat arena. In the traditional Caste Panchayats, Village Panchayats and in the British Scheme of local governments women remained entirely excluded. (Nagendra 2004)

In establishing Panchayats most state government apprehend the provision of co-option of two women in case no women could come through direct elections. Prevalent practice during 1960's and 1970's was the co-option of two women at best for each PR body, as women could not come through direct elections, even though the requirement of co-option of women was not followed uniformly for all PR bodies and in every state, for instance Uttar Pradesh Jammu and Kashmir, did not follow the scheme (Institute of Social Studies Trust 1995).

From the outset, women's involvement in PRIs was dominated by two inter-related themes: representation of women in these bodies and

effectiveness and outcome of their participation. Co-option of few women was the only available option for women to participate and it was a travesty for it could not produce the desired and verify no results at all. The co-option method, of course provided one convenient scope for the dominant caste/class leaders to install their family women such as wife; mother as their yoke and the very purpose of the policy was led to fall flat.

It took 43 years to realize and recognize that women are yet another disadvantaged group and they also require a solution to their discrimination. Women have received a preferential consideration and that too only in the sphere of political representation and that again in local governments (Rao 1996).

Women are changing the governance in India. They are being elected to local councils in an unprecedented numbers as a result of amendments to the constitution that mandate the reservation of seats for women in local governments. In India, we call this new system the Panchayati Raj Institution System (PRI). The women whom PRI has brought into politics are now governing, be it in one village, or a larger area such as 100 villages or a district. This process of restructuring the national political and administrative system started as recently as January 1994, and thus it is too early to assess the impact of women's entry into formal structures of the government. The sheer number of women that PRI has brought into the political system has made a difference. The percentages of women at various levels of political activity have shifted dramatically as a result of the constitutional change, from 4-5 % before to 25-40 % after. But the difference is also qualitative, because these women are bringing their experience in the governance of civic society. In this way they are making the state sensitive to the issues of poverty, inequality and gender injustice.

Palanithuri (1997) in a case study 'New Panchayati Raj System at Work: An Evaluation of Tamil Nadu' reported that they were not informed or invited to the meetings in male headed Gram Panchayat. Women members have always projected the issues relating to women. It is common that the husbands of the members used to accompany them (women) when they come to attend the meetings.

Pai (1998) according to his field notes in Meerut District 'Pradhanis in New Panchayats' revealed that many of the Pradhanis were illiterate

and only able to put their signatures on official papers. Regarding their roles, the study revealed that they were almost insignificant in the functioning of Gram and Block Panchayat bodies. As they belonged to better off families in the villages, they do not work outside their homes. They agreed to stand for elections due to family pressure and also the decision of their community and not because they were keen to do so. The reservations provided by the Government had forced them to contest elections; provision of reservation has not led them to participate in decision-making in local bodies.

Nambiar (2001) in her study of 'Making the Gram Sabha Work' noted the difference utilities in organizing the Gram Sabha. Majority of women reported that they were not informed or invited to the meetings. While other were hesitant in participating in meetings in the presence of a large number of elder members. However, they have to forego their day's wages or household duties just to identify beneficiaries as to convey what the gram Panchayat would do in future. In this context, the present study was undertaken

To Know the Leadership Qualities

- (i) To know the obstacles for women in Panchayat and role performance in Panchayat.
- (ii) To highlight the factors which overtly or covertly tend to promote or prevent women members from performing their roles.
- (iii) To know the nature and extent of participation and role performance in decision-making

## METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted in Jammu province. Jammu province includes seven districts. Out of seven districts only two districts were selected viz Jammu and Kathua for the purpose of this study. District Jammu is divided into eleven blocks whereas district Kathua is divided into eight blocks respectively. Out of these eleven blocks of district Jammu, only ten blocks were selected and four blocks from the district Kathua were selected for this purpose. In all 33 women elected representatives were selected from each of the two districts, 23 WERs were selected from Jammu district and 10 WERs from four blocks of Kathua district were selected for the previously mentioned purpose. Purposive sampling technique was used for selecting the

sample from different blocks of district Jammu and Kathua. Interview schedule and focused group discussions were used to elicit the required information. The interview schedule comprised of three sections viz (a) demographic profile of the respondents (b) factors affecting women members from performing their roles (c) expectations and suggestions for better leadership. The data was collected in the month of March-April 2007

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted with the aim to study the “*Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions*”. The information was elicited as per the objectives of the study.

### Respondents Profile

Out of total (33) respondents, 23 belong to middle age group varying from 30-50yrs. one respondent was old (above 70 yrs), the respondent is a reelected candidate since the last Panchayat election. It may be stated here that age factor is off course a significant factor. A matured age reflects quite sound and reasonable views in conformity with the needs and necessities warranted by the circumstances (Table 1).

Out of the majority (viz. 23) twenty respondents were married and rest three were widow and possessed of academic qualification in the grades of graduates -9, Hr-sec 4 and primary-4

Father out of thirty three respondents, nine belong to the age group of 51-70 yrs with only one having graduate degree and rest possessed of primary or secondary qualifications. Whereas out of total respondents (33) eight had no academic qualification.

Hazel (1998) observed that the average age of WER's was 45 years. It indicated that they tend to enter the Panchayati Raj Institutions when they had become relatively free of family responsibilities regarding children.

Manikyamaba (2000) in her study in Andhra

Pradesh revealed that the extent of participation of the young and the middle age is generally more than that of old age.

It may be also placed here that the data collected after detail survey corroborates the view that the middle age group possessed of necessary educational background, duly figure in and get associated with the activities of the Panchayat substantially.

It is interesting to know that no women Panch was paid any honorarium for her work. It thereby shows that no women panch was paid any honorarium for her work. It thereby shows that these WERs were working on self fewer bases for an overall general welfare and development of the people and that of the women interests in particular.

### Political Profile of Respondent

Majority (33) of the respondents were elected in the year 2001 in PRIs. there was only one panch member who initially came as an elected panch in 1980 and got reelected in 2001. Majority (23) of the respondents contested elections as general candidates while rest ten contested election from reserved seats, nine from schedule tribe and one from schedule caste. It is found that twenty seven women respondents were not members of any organization. 4 of the respondents were members of local organizations like Mahila Mandal. Majority (20) of the respondents had no political affiliation. they belonged to general category and contested elections as independent candidates. Thirteen respondents were supported by one or the other political party out of which eight respondents were from congress party, four were from NC (Table 2).

The support from any party however does not always imply that the person is an active member of the party. It has been observed that primary membership and affiliation to political party become more active and articulate. It may be added here that some respondents seek membership of political party after their

**Table 1: Respondents profile (N=33)**

| Age<br>(in years) | No. | Marital status |         | Illiterate | Education |        |      | Income |
|-------------------|-----|----------------|---------|------------|-----------|--------|------|--------|
|                   |     | Widow          | Married |            | Low       | Middle | High |        |
| 30-50             | 23  | 3              | 20      | 6          | 4         | 4      | 8    | -      |
| 51-70             | 9   | -              | 9       | 1          | 5         | 2      | 1    | -      |
| 70 & above        | 1   | 1              | -       | 1          | -         | -      | -    | -      |

**Table 2: Political profile of respondent (N=33)**

| Category |   | Member of organisation |    |              |   |                        |   | Political party |   |          |   |             |   | Present position |   |       |   |   |    |
|----------|---|------------------------|----|--------------|---|------------------------|---|-----------------|---|----------|---|-------------|---|------------------|---|-------|---|---|----|
| G        | R | Mahila Mandal          |    | Co-Operative |   | Village Dev. Committee |   | NC              |   | Congress |   | Independent |   | Sar-panch        |   | Panch |   |   |    |
|          |   | SC                     | ST | G            | R | G                      | R | G               | R | G        | R | G           | R | G                | R | G     | R |   |    |
| 23       |   | 1                      | 9  | 2            | 2 | 1                      | - | 1               | - | 4        | - | 8           | 1 | 20               | - | 1     | - | 2 | 10 |

G = General, R = Reserved, SC = Schedule Caste, ST = Schedule Tribe NC=National Conference

successful context in the elections. However, in some cases sometimes the respondents enjoyed backing and support of a political party as well.

Ambedkar (2006) also highlights that almost 50% of the women Panchayat leaders belong to one or the other political party. Only few mentioned that they had no particular political affiliation and contested as independent candidate

Gowda (1998) also showed that the women leaders had links with one or the other political party as such members were persuaded and astonished by their political mentors who were already in politics. Till date we come across that women are supported by political parties reason being affiliation to such political and constitutional change is making women to some extent as a puppet in such organizations. This is also fact that there is a change in number of women coming into political activity and is struggling hard. However, it is too early to access the impact of women's entry into formal structures of the government.

Ambedkar (2000) showed that larger size of participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institution could take place because of reservation of seats for the women candidates.

### Reason for Contesting Elections

Majority (23) of the respondents wished to help people in the society and to work for the development of the concerned village. 10 respondents mentioned that they had pressure from the family especially from their husbands and father-in-law's. 5 respondents entered Panchayat to hold power and to prove their identity, political parties motivated five respondents and the same number mentioned that since there was no other women member available she, thus, contested elections (Table 3).

Panda (1999) study observed that the most of the women entered the Panchayat Raj Institution

due to persuasion by their family members and pressure from the village community, pressure from political party and their personal interests.

**Table 3: Reason for contesting elections.**

| Reason                                   | Frequency |
|------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Hold power                               | 5         |
| Help people in society                   | 23        |
| Pressure from family members             | 10        |
| Pressure from party                      | 5         |
| Non-availability of women representative | 2         |

1 Multiple responses.

Ambedkar (2006) reported that women entry into political arena particularly at the state level depended on their support within the party than support from electorate. 20 of the respondents contested elections for non-availability of women representative in Panchayat.

### Meetings Attended by WER's in Panchayat

Majority (21) of the respondents had complete freedom of expression in the meetings. They were not found meek or mute; they usually raised their point and view in the Panchayat meetings. They actively participated actively in the discussion and debates regarding future plan of action. They were free to determine areas required more of development and financial assistance required for the betterment of the people. 12 respondents expressed that they weren't free to put forth their point of view. Gender disparity was found to be the major reasons for not entertaining their viewpoints, as male member's view points were preferred in male-headed panchants other reason being that they felt hesitant to present their views in front of the male members. Six respondents reported that it was difficult for women to attend the meetings reason being odd topographical consideration and domestic constraints (Table 4).

Palanithuri (1999); in his study revealed that women members are facing lot of problems in

**Table 4: Meetings attended by WER's in Panchayat (N=33)**

| <i>Respondents</i> |           | <i>Attended meetings</i> |                  | <i>Convening of unscheduled meetings</i> |           |
|--------------------|-----------|--------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <i>Yes</i>         | <i>No</i> | <i>Regularly</i>         | <i>Sometimes</i> | <i>Yes</i>                               | <i>No</i> |
| 27                 | 6         | 24                       | 3                | 16                                       | 11        |

Reasons for not attending meetings

- 1 Topographical consideration
- 2 Domestic constraints

Panchayat and male members do not cooperate with elected women ward members. The reservation of women in such organization alone will not help them to make decisions unless she becomes assertive. The reservation of women in such organizations alone will not help them to make decisions unless she becomes assertive.

### Freedom of Speech and Expression

Majority (21) of the respondents had complete freedom of expression in the meetings, they were not found meek or mute, they usually raised their point and view in the Panchayat meetings. Twelve respondents expressed that they were not free to put forth their view points. Gender disparity was found to be the major reasons for not entertaining their view points as male members view points were preferred in male headed Panchayats. Other reason being that they (WERs) felt hesitant to present their views in front of the male members (Table 5).

Nanda (2006) also reveals that in spite having a constitution and the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act which reinforces the equity and equality and social justice, women is insignificant and not into decision making in such bodies/organizations.

### Reaction of WER's to the Non-Cooperation of Panchs

Twelve respondents who had no freedom of speech in Panchayat meetings gave out the reason of their disinterest in such meetings due to factors like, due to their inability in motivating their colleagues, frustration of not being heard and some of the members keeping away because of non-cooperation.

**Table 5: Freedom of speech and expression ( N=33)**

| <i>Freedom of opinion</i> |           | <i>If no, Reasons for not entertaining views</i> |                         |              |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Yes</i>                | <i>No</i> | <i>No interest</i>                               | <i>Gender Disparity</i> | <i>Caste</i> |
| 21                        | 12        | 2                                                | 11                      | 1            |

Table 6(a) reveals that out of total respondents, five WERs did not find support from their colleagues during Panchayat meetings and while not being supported, they try to motivate them to their best. Three of them felt frustrated and four of them remain absent from meetings as they felt useless to attend the meeting, if their views were not taken into considerations.

**Table 6(a): Reaction of WER's to the non-cooperation of Panchs**

| <i>Reaction</i>            | <i>Frequency</i> |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| Try to motivate them       | 5                |
| Frustration                | 3                |
| Remain absent from meeting | 4                |

As also reported by Nambiar (2001) that women were hesitant to attend such meetings because of frustration of not being heard and are only to communicate to the beneficiaries the plan of action of gram Panchyat.

Mandal (2003) also reported that 28% of the total women members took refutation of their points in the meetings without any form of protest or any pressure to take note of their views.

### Problems Faced By WER's

Problems faced by WERs from their colleagues out of the total respondents, ten stated that they face problems from other panchs due to their self-motive; Panchayat members were exclusively guided by their personal interest. Whereas seven respondents argued non cooperation that they primarily face on the basis of gender discrimination. The women representative thus felt hurt for not having been heard or supported and even if they presented befitting and relevant

arguments. Two respondents even faced abusive language from the male counterparts when they place their views for the development purpose of the area. One respondent alone revealed that even the female colleagues for their personal views and differences did not support her (Table 6 b).

**Table 6(b): Problems faced by WER's. (N=12)**

| <i>Problems</i>                             | <i>Frequency</i> |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Abusive language                            | 2                |
| Self-motive of panch members                | 10               |
| Interference                                | 7                |
| Lack of support from male members           | 7                |
| Lack of support from female members         | 1                |
| Inhibitions in speaking in front of elders. | 5                |

\*Showing multiple response

### Ways to Overcome Constraints

WERs adopt numerous methods to overcome constraints. An average number (5) of respondents reported that they motivated the Panchayat members to inculcate the interest for a positive approach in the overall interests of the area. Three respondents reported that they built confidence among themselves to face such situations and dispose off matters even difference in a positive manner. Two respondents revealed that they regularly attended the meetings to keep themselves updated and an equal number opine that they opine that they avoid the situation reason being that it was all futile exercise to push the matter any further (Table 6 c).

**Table 6(c): Ways to overcome constraints (N=12)**

| <i>To overcome constraints</i>                        | <i>Frequency</i> |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Regularly attended meetings to keep themselves update | 10               |
| Participated in discussion at village level           | 8                |
| Building confidence                                   | 8                |
| By motivating panchayat members                       | 6                |
| Avoid the situation                                   | 4                |

1 Multiple responses.

### Decisions Taken by Women in Panchayat

Majority (17) of the respondents took decisions at their own level in Panchayat

**Table 7: Decisions taken by women in Panchayats (N= 33)**

| <i>Decision taken</i> |           | <i>If no, Reasons</i>     |                                 |                             |                                |
|-----------------------|-----------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Yes</i>            | <i>No</i> | <i>Lack of confidence</i> | <i>Views are not considered</i> | <i>Unaware about agenda</i> | <i>Never attended meetings</i> |
| 17                    | 16        | 1                         | 8                               | 1                           | 6                              |

meetings as they opined that they are confident enough that decisions taken by them will benefit the people of their village. The reason s for their indifferent behaviour in Panchayat meetings was gender decimation and male domination. Eight WERs stated that only male members held the right to take decisions on their own. Due to this, six respondents opined that they never wanted to attend Panchayat meetings. One respondent was of the view that she usually stands unaware about the agenda thus could not comment on any deliberation. Another respondent felt hesitant to participate in the discussions in presence of male members present in the meetings, partly because they lacked confidence (Table 7).

Nambiar (2001) also reported that women were not informed or invited to the meetings.

### Stumbling Blocks in Family

Out of thirty three respondents thirteen faced constraints from the family. Six of the respondents believed that the family had no progressive o a social standing in the community. the family were still taboo ridden and victims of ignorance and guided by old traditions. Four of the respondents stated that family members do not help them in household chores so household chores act as constraint in their work. Whenever women take up Panchayat works and role seriously, some oversight in family responsibilities will only be inevitable simply because they will not be able to devote the same amount of time and energy compared to when they were not Panchayats members. One respondent faced constraints like family interference in their work; still another respondent faced lack of support by family that is family did not support them economically. On the whole it may be concluded that the panches were between the fire and the frying pan. Neither the government gave them any dole or incentive to inspire their importance and position in the family nor were the panches themselves on their own of any assistance to the family in the performance of its daily chores of the life. Hence indifference from the family

Kumtakar's (1999) study revealed that a

**Table 8: Constraints faced by WER's from family (N=33)**

| <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>If yes, constraints faced</i>       | <i>Frequency</i> |
|------------|-----------|----------------------------------------|------------------|
| 13         | 20        | *family interference                   | 1                |
|            |           | *lack of support by the family members | 1                |
|            |           | *household chores                      | 4                |
|            |           | *economic constraints                  | 1                |
|            |           | *no social standing of the family      | 6                |

majority of women leaders admitted that their husbands discouraged them from attending the meetings or hindered their activities. In most cases, it is the husband who made the decisions for Panchayat and the wives put their signature or thumb impressions on the official documents.

#### **Problems faced by WER's While Dealing with the Administration**

Majority of the WERs (22) revealed that they received support from government and administration whereas eleven WERs did not receive support from the administration reason being the male domination of the administration who were either discourteous, or corrupt showing utter disregard on gender basis morally, materially which also at times resulted in complete and total disassociation with the administration (Table 9).

Ambedkar (2006) in his study reported that women leaders mentioned the officials as corrupt men.

#### **Changes Required in Family and Community**

An average number (20) of respondents wanted economic support from the administration so that they could perform better developmental activities in their village. Eight respondents required help from family members to perform family chores, ten of the respondents mentioned that they want liberal outlook from the family and community so that she can prove their mettle in the Panchayat (Table 10).

**Table 10: Changes required in family and community (N=33)**

| <i>Changes</i>                               | <i>Frequency</i> |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1 Freedom from restrictions by family        | 1                |
| 2 Freedom from restrictions by community     | 2                |
| 3 Economic support from government           | 20               |
| 4 Help in household chores by family members | 8                |
| 5 Liberal outlook                            | 10               |

\* Multiple responses

#### **Performance for Better Leadership**

Majority (22) of the respondents wanted freedom from family and community which would make them to perform as better leaders. Further ten respondents felt that ability to speak would serve as an asset for convening public and invoke their confidence and moral support. Nine respondents preferred literacy, self confidence and skill training for performance as an efficient leader for welfare and development of the people. Eight respondents believe that experience, self decision making power and honorarium would strengthen their leadership qualities. Thirteen respondents preferred self initiative and organizing capacity for income generation. Thus, the survey of this study would make one conclude that it is somewhat not fair to expect the women to make wonders when she is as a first timer asked to

**Table 11: Performance for better leadership (N=33)**

| <i>Changes</i>                        | <i>Frequency</i> |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| 3 Community and family restrictions   | 23               |
| 4 Literacy                            | 9                |
| 5 Self decision making power          | 8                |
| 6 Honorarium                          | 8                |
| 7 Village co-operation                | 5                |
| 8 Support services                    | 5                |
| 9 Self confidence and self-initiative | 10               |
| 10 Ability to speak in public         | 10               |
| 11 Orientation programme for panches  | 13               |
| 12 Experience                         | 8                |
| 13 No male domination                 | 5                |
| 14 Training for leadership skills     | 7                |

\* Multiple responses

**Table 9: Problems faced by WER's while dealing with the administration (N=33)**

| <i>Support By Govt. officials</i> |           | <i>If No, problems faced</i> |                       |                         |                                   |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Yes</i>                        | <i>No</i> | <i>Corruption</i>            | <i>Harsh language</i> | <i>Discourage women</i> | <i>Never dealt with officials</i> |
| 22                                | 11        | 5                            | 5                     | 7                       | 5                                 |

2 Multiple responses

represent her constituency. History reveals the fact that the primitive Indian society never encouraged the woman to come out of her domestic shell and play a role with her counterpart, the man. She was always a domesticated tool in the hands of the male patriarch. It is this imperative that she needs a thorough helping programme that would provide her education and confidence building initiatives which could chisel her participation of activities required for becoming representative of people in one form or the other (Table 11).

### Factors that Motivate Women to Take Part in Panchayat

Out of total respondents 12 reported that economic independence, family encouragement, transparency in PRIs and administration, support from government officials would go long way in motivating the women folk to participate in panchayat. 4 respondents revealed that their dedication and commitment play an important and positive role for joining panchayats (Table 12).

**Table 12: Factors that motivate women to take part in Panchayat**

| <i>Factors</i>          | <i>Frequency</i> |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| 1 Economic Independence | 9                |
| 2 Family Encouragement  | 5                |
| 3 Commitment to Service | 9                |
| 4 Transparency          | 9                |
| 5 Support               | 9                |
| 6 Communication Skills  | 5                |

\* Multiple responses

### CONCLUSION

In Indian Constitution, there are provisions for equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their social and economic status. However such provisions exist only in pen and paper for millions of economically and socially disadvantaged people in India especially SC's, ST's and Women. In India women are in much worst position than men not only in terms of sex ratio, literacy rate, work force participation, life expectancy, but also in terms of their access to power structure which controls and guides the development programmes of a society. Since access to political opportunities and participation in political decision making process are important components of capability and autonomy, discrimination in this respect leads

to wastage of women's talent and efficiency which are necessary for all around development of the country. One of the three variables used in the construction of the Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) is the relative share of women in administrative and managerial position (UNDP 1995). Women need to be involved in decision-making process in order to bring their demands in the national agenda. In order to ensure empowerment of women in political arena, the issue of reservation of 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the seats for women in grass root levels of the organizations was taken up by different women's organizations and social thinkers. Accordingly, the Government of India passed the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment, which was followed by the 74<sup>th</sup> amendment mandating reservation of 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the seats of women in all village block and district level elected bodies.

The role of female Panchayat members in the political decision making process has been examined critically on the basis of data collection by interviewing the WER's of seven blocks of District Jammu, J&K. The present study entitled "*Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions*" is a study conducted to know the extent of women's participation in decision-making and stumbling blocks for women in their respective roles.

The study shows that the significant number of WERs attended Panchayat meetings regularly but few members have full freedom of speech and expression in the Panchayat meetings and they usually raise their points. Ten respondents mentioned that their views were not considered. The major reason being patriarchal set up and thereby non co-operation. As a reaction the respondents got frustrated and choose to abstain from the further meetings. However a fraction of members from within the Panchayat thought of overcoming the awkwardness of the situation by organizing themselves to attend meetings as usual to face and challenge the somewhat a critical face. They build confidence among themselves to establish their self-entirety. A minimal number of the WERs revealed that they no doubt received support from the government officials and administration. Whereas a majority held the opposite view reason being that the male members would not encourage any progressive measures for the women and they were not in any way prepared to reconcile with either a superior or even an equal position for their women members. However, it is gratifying to observe that women

representatives ignored the non co-operative behavior of their colleagues and pushed further their own efforts to resolve the problems of the area. The data indicates how the panch members feel about increasing and accelerating the efficiency of working in the Panchayats. They feel that there should be practically no interference from the family and community stalling the independent functioning of the panch women members. The panch members complained that they get no assistance and help from family members in the discharge of their domestic work. A majority of the respondents revealed that financial assistance is a necessary ingredient for their self esteem, their independent functioning and their committed concern and approach to the needs and urges of the people of the area.

In conclusion it may be considered that to achieve the women empowerment, advancement can be facilitated with the co-ordination of different sections of the society such as male gentry, religious heads, political leaders who should come forward and shun their interpersonal interest even ego to understand and appreciate that the women are equally as important segments of society as men. Male chauvinism must go the sooner so much the better. Unless the male ridden society is transformed and replaced by a better socio-economic set up where men and women are equal co-workers, the future of human set up appears to be bleak.

### SUGGESTIONS

- 1 It is evident that men's attitude towards women's entry into politics has begun to change from that of total rejection to limited encouragement and in some cases even to active encouragement. This trend needs to be strengthened through orientation courses and training programmes for officials and elected representatives, both men and women. Besides there is a need to train the women leaders at regular intervals to enable them to manage the responsibilities assigned to them in the Panchayats at all the levels. Since the hard up women members found it difficult to forgo their wages for attending training programmes, these must be organized at their doorstep and some of the articulate Panchayat leaders should be involved as the trainers.
- 2 Another important effort required for real empowerment of rural women is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and rearing children needs to be transformed into a feeling of equal partnership of women and men. To inculcate this they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both.
- 3 Studies on women in politics have emphasized that contact with outside world makes women more alert and also active in the political process. There could be two ways of doing it. Firstly, interaction between enlightened rural women and illiterate elected one's should be encouraged. Secondly, these women could be taken out to the urban areas and their interaction with educated urban elected women representatives be arranged.
- 4 The women should also be encouraged to organize themselves. The Mahila Mandals in the village can be effectively used as instruments to mobilize them for this purpose. Some successful women's organisations can also act as catalytic agents for encouraging the women's participation in social and political activities. The Government should provide finances and infrastructure to some of the deserving and successful women organizations to take up the responsibility of encouraging the women elected representatives. The leaders of women's movement in the country could also take up this task. They too can provide support to sensitize the rural women.
- 5 Incentives play a vital role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision-making. It has been noticed that there are certain very active and enlightened women leaders at all the levels of Panchayats, who have been successfully implementing the developmental schemes and have ensured overall development of their constituencies. Such leaders need to be encouraged by publicizing their leadership qualities and honouring them in public meetings. It will certainly encourage other women representatives and their success stories and good practices will get replicated.
- 6 The media both print as well as electronic can play an important role in creating awareness in the rural society. It can act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice.

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