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WOMEN AND RURAL LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENT: A STUDY OF ANANTHAPURAMU DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

The Constitution of India is based on the principles of equality and guarantees equality before law and equal protection to all its citizens. It not only guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, but also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth. However, these rights have remained de jure and have not been translated into de facto rights. As such, women have been denied social, economic, civil and political rights in many spheres. An important area where women have been inadequately represented is in the political sphere. Articles 325 and 326 of the Constitution of India guarantee political equality- equal right to participation in political activities and right to vote respectively. While the latter has been accessed, exercised and enjoyed by a large number of women, the former i.e., right to equal political participation is still a distant dream. Lack of space for participation in political bodies has not only resulted in their presence in meager numbers in these decision making bodies but also in the neglect of their issues and experiences in policy making.

INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader arena of governance in any country. Governance relates to a set of rules, institutions, and values that are involved in the management of state and society. Governance institutions and processes include political parties, parliaments, government and their interactions with society. Although governance is a generic term which could mean good government or management, the governance values, types of government, the nature of political processes, the political parties and organizations, which/whose interests are represented and protected, and the extent of power that the masses have to challenge the state or in suggesting alternatives in methods of governance etc. may vary in different political systems.

Liberal democracy is founded on reason, law, and freedom of choice but the position of different social groups in the social and political space where power is located is not always equal in practice. This is particularly

so in the case of women. The nature of society or state has a decisive impact on the extent and effectiveness of women's political presence and participation. Notions of democracy, governance and the state are often not gender neutral constructs but result from both historical factors and experiences. The state and its organizational entities reflect the same social forces as other social organizations. It is thus necessary to examine the gender balance in women's participation in the political process, decision making and policy formulation.

The limited nature of female participation and representation in national decision making institutions has important consequences for women and for the legitimacy of the institutions. Where women constitute half the population in a political system which supports equality and where both women and men are legally eligible for political office, women's participation should be equal to that of men. If this is not the case, it signifies deep flaws within the political system. Representation is not only a means of ensuring individual participation. It is also the responsibility of the representatives to act on behalf of the constituents, including women, who elected them and reflect their ideas and aspirations. Women's disproportionate absence from the political process would mean that the concerns of half the population cannot be sufficiently attended to or acted upon as it denies their viewpoints sufficient opportunity to be integrated in the political system.

While the Indian democratic state is committed to the protection of individual rights within the context of citizenship, a closer look at how it operates for the women reveals that these rights are not accessible in the public and private spheres in their full potential to all the women in India. There are historical, social and cultural factors that have limited women's capacity and chances to exercise their freedom to participate in the political processes. The evolution of Indian democracy through the 14 general elections so far has reflected a low representation of women in Parliament, State legislatures, in political parties and other decision-making bodies.

The under representation of women in the political sphere is inextricably linked with the low and inferior status of women in society in India especially in the context of the declining sex ratio, increasing violence and crimes against women and their marginalized status in employment, education and health sectors. The comparative position of gender-related development index (GDI) reveals that among 177 countries, India ranks 113th, indicating its very low gender-equity status.

Although the gap between male and female literacy rates has been narrowing, there is still very large disparity in this regard. While male literacy rate in India is 75.3 per cent, female literacy rate is only 53.7 per cent. It is even worse among Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Among, the SC 50 per cent males are literate, while only 24 per cent females can read and write and among ST, 41 per cent males and only 18 per cent females are literate.

An average Indian woman has little control over her own fertility and reproductive health. More women are illiterates compared to men and more women drop out of school. There are fewer women in the paid workforce than men. Women's work is undervalued and unrecognized. Women work longer hours than men and carry the major share of household and community work which is unpaid and invisible. Women and men earn unequal wages. Women are legally discriminated against in land and property rights. Women face violence inside and outside the family throughout their lives. Most women in India have very little say in decisions affecting their own lives. The cumulative effect of all this is that women tend to lack the self-confidence and skills needed to function effectively in the public sphere. The under representation of women and absence of women from positions of power and decision-making reinforces their exploitation and deprivation. It is in this context that women's greater political representation becomes all the more necessary.

THE CONSTITUTION (73RD AMENDMENT) ACT, 1993

The amendment phase began with the 64th Amendment bill (1989), which was introduced in Parliament for constituting panchayats in every State at the village, intermediate and district levels. It proposed that the Legislature of a State could by law endow the panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government. Unfortunately, though the Bill got a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha, it was struck down in the Rajya Sabha on October 15, 1989, by just two votes.

The next government headed by V.P. Singh also made an abortive effort to provide Constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj system through the introduction of 74th Amendment. These failures notwithstanding, the government declared its commitment to the philosophy of Power to the People and to achieve this objective provided the much needed constitutional status to Panchayats. The then Congress-I government headed by P.V. Narasimha Rao initiated the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution in 1991. A comprehensive amendment was introduced in the form of Constitution (72nd Amendment) Bill in September 1991, which was subsequently referred to a Joint Select Committee of the Parliament in December 1991 for a detailed examination.

Finally, after including the necessary amendments, the amendment was passed with near unanimity in the Lok Sabha on December 22, 1992 and in the Rajya Sabha on December 23, 1992. The bill got the President's assent on April 20, 1993 and the Constitution 73rd Amendment Act came into effect from April 24, 1993. This Amendment has, in effect, made the transfer of power to Panchayats a part of the most basic document of this nation the Constitution of India.

The Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, poured new vigour to Panchayati Raj Institutions in all parts of rural India. As per the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, the Panchayati Raj Institutions are working in 28 States and 7 Union Territories of India with slight modifications.

DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES AND 73RD AMENDMENT

Act gives powers and responsibilities to the panchayats to plan and execute economic development programmes. It involves making plans for economic development, social justice and the implementation of schemes listed in the XI Schedule, The activities earmarked for Panchayat Raj Institutions may be grouped under five categories for academic purposes.

1. **Economic Development:** There are 11 items which talk about economic development. One of them relates to anti-poverty programmes, such as JRY, IRDP, etc. Other areas are agriculture, land improvement, minor irrigation, animal husbandry, fishery, social forestry, minor forest produce, small scale and cottage industry, fuel and fodder.
2. **Education:** There are five items under this category. Primary and Secondary Schools, non-formal education, libraries, technical training, cultural activities, etc.
3. **Health:** There are two items related to health, such as health and sanitation and family welfare.
4. **Welfare, including Women and Child development:** There are four items which include social welfare: welfare of weaker sections, public distribution system, women and child development.
5. **Infrastructure Development:** There are seven items here such as roads, housing, drinking water, markets, electrification, maintenance of community assets, etc.

Among these, there are certain items (apart from the items on anti-poverty programme) which are meant for the poor or the under privileged. Schemes for weaker sections or programmes for women and child development fall under this category. The benefits of public distribution system should also go to the poor. Land reforms is central to all, particularly distribution of waste-land enforcement of the tenancy laws constitute a frontal attack on poverty.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the extent of participation of backward class women elected
2. To assess the perception of women about the Panchayat system in general and their role in particular; and
3. To find out the factors which tend to promote or prevent women members from performing their roles.

SAMPLE DESIGN

In Ananthapuramu district there are 4482 elected women representatives at three-tiers of Panchayat institutions. Among them 1277 constituting 28.39 percent of total women representatives belong to backward class community. So there are 1151 BC women representative members and 126 BC women heading the Panchayats. For in depth study on the functioning style and the empowermental impact of Panchayat Raj institutional participation, 33 per cent (380 members) of elected BC women representative members i.e. Ward members, MPTCs, ZPTCs and 66 per cent (83) BC women heads i.e. Gram Panchayat Presidents and Mandal Parishad Presidents were selected by simple random sampling method. Care was taken to cover all three revenue divisions of the district. So the universe of the study constitutes 463 Backward Class women representatives.

PROFILE OF STUDY AREA

Ananthapuramu district lies between 13°-40 and 15°-15' Northern Latitude and 76° -50' and 78° -30' Eastern Longitude physically in Rayalaseema zone and the geographical division of western plateau. The district ranks first in terms of geographical area out 23 districts in the State and Seventh in terms of population. Total geographical area of the district is 19,135 Sq. Km and the total forest area is 1,969.78 Sq. Km, which works out to 10.30% of the total geographical area. For administrative convenience the district is divided in to 5 revenue divisions, which in turn divided in to 63 Mandals.

The total population of Ananthapuramu district as per 2011 provisional population statistics is 4,083,315 of which the percentage of males and females is 50.57 and 49.43 per cent respectively. The sex ratio as per 2011 provisional population statistics is 977 females per 1000 males, which is higher than the all India average (944) but lower than the state average (992).

The literacy rate of the district is 64.28per cent. Among males and females, literates constitute 74.09% and 54.31% respectively which is lesser than the state level (75.56% Males, 59.74 females) and all India level (82.14% Males, 65.46 females) averages. Out of the total population, 48.83% are workers. Workers constitute 57.83% among males and 39.42% among females, which is higher than the state level and all India level averages.

Table 1
Salient Features of Ananthapuramu District

Particulars	Persons	Male	Female
Population Total	4,083,315	2,064,928	2,018,387
Population Rural	2936359(71.91)	1,489,021	1,447,338
Population – Urban	1146956(28.09)	575,907	571,049
Population (0-6)	426,922	221,539	205,383
SC Population	514,896	263,291	251,605
ST Population	127,161	65,722	61,439
Number of Literates	2,350,294	329,013	984593
Number of Illiterates	1,733,021	1,735,915	1,033,794
Total Workers	1,777,536	1,075,456	702,080
Main Workers	1,471,218	972,022	499,196
Marginal Workers	306,318	103,434	202,884
Non-Workers	1,862,942	784,132	1,078,810
Household Size	5.1		
Proportion of Urban population (%)	28.09		
Sex Ratio (females per 1000 males)	977(Total)	972(Rural)	992(Urban)
Sex Ratio (0-6 Years)	927(Total)	928(Rural)	925(Urban)

Source: Registrar General, Census of India

IMPACT OF PRI MEMBERSHIP ON WOMEN

The rationale behind providing 33 per cent of reservations is intended to empower women politically and thereby to achieve social and economic empowerment. In this study an attempt is made to assess the empowerment impact of PRI membership, by examining the access to resources, control over resources, personal savings, cash in hand, debt position, possession of silver and gold ornaments, ability to handle PRI works, respect within family, possession of permanent assets, dependency on males, hesitance in expressing views, participation in political discussions, decision making status on family matters, social status, awareness about laws, rules and regulations, positive attitude towards women, leadership development, role in political parties, level of political ambition, level of political efficacy, level of sense of political knowledge, economic status etc. On these

parameters the responses of respondents has categorized into significant increase, marginally increased, status quo and can't say.

CONTROL OVER RESOURCE

The access to resources will yield good results if the control on such resources is there and otherwise not. The control over resources in outside the family is essential for empowerment of women. The respondent's views on their access to resource are given in table 2.

Table – 2
Impact of PRI Membership on Control over Resources

Sl. No.	Responses	General BC women Representatives	BC women Heads of PRIs	Total
1	Significantly Increased	76 (20.00)	39 (46.99)	115 (24.84)
2	Marginally Increased	119 (31.32)	18 (21.69)	137 (29.59)
3	Status quo / No change	164 (43.16)	23 (27.71)	187 (40.39)
4	Can't Say / Don't know	21 (5.53)	3 (3.61)	24 (5.18)
Total		380 (100.00)	83 (100.00)	463 (100.00)

Source: Field Data

*Figures in Parentheses are percentages to the total.

It is clear from table 6.33 that as many as 68.68 per cent of BC women heads reported that the PRI membership has positive impact on their control over resources. To be precise a preponderant majority i.e. 46.99 per cent of BC women heads of PRIs declared that their membership has significantly increased their control over resources. Nearly 21.69 per cent of them reported marginal increase in their controlling power over resources. But in case of general BC women representatives the positive impact is confined to 51.32 per cent. It means that the headship of Panchayat Raj Institutions providing good opportunities to women to have control over resources, when compare to general BC women representatives. Among general BC women representatives as many as 43.16 per cent stated that there is no change in their control over resources due to membership in PRIs. Negligible percentage of general BC women representatives and heads of PRIs denied responding.

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND ACCESS TO MONEY

The increased control over resources is likely to enhance the freedom of movement and access to money in hand. Table 3 gives the details of respondent’s responses on the freedom of movement and access to money due to PRI membership.

**Table –3
Impact of PRI membership on Freedom of Movement and Access to Money**

Sl. No.	Responses	General BC women Representatives	BC women Heads of PRIs	Total
1	Significantly Increased	21 (5.53)	22 (26.51)	43 (9.29)
2	Marginally Increased	186 (48.95)	38 (45.78)	224 (48.38)
3	Status quo / No change	134 (35.26)	19 (22.89)	153 (33.05)
4	Can't Say / Don't know	39 (10.26)	4 (4.82)	43 (9.29)
Total		380 (100.00)	83 (100.00)	463 (100.00)

Source: Field Data

*Figures in Parentheses are percentages to the total.

The impact of PRI membership has its positive impact on freedom of movement and access to money on BC women heads of PRIs than on general BC women representatives. Table 6.36 reveals that as many as 72.29 per cent of sample BC women heads of PRIs reported either significant or marginal increase in their freedom of movement as well as access to money due to PRI membership. In case of general BC women representatives positive impact is reported by 54.48 per cent of sample. More than one-third of general BC women representatives reported status quo in their freedom of movement and their access to money. Nearly 22.89 per cent of BC women heads of PRIs reported status quo in their freedom of movement and their access to money. 39 out of 380 general BC women representatives and 4 out of 83 women heads of PRIs not expressed their views on their freedom of movement and their access to money.

DECISION MAKING

The particulars of the impact of PRI membership on decision making power in the household with regard to family matters is given in table 4.

Table – 4
Impact of PRI membership on Participation in Household Decision Making

Sl. No.	Responses	General BC women Representatives	BC women Heads of PRIs	Total
1	Significantly Increased	61 (16.05)	26 (31.33)	87 (18.79)
2	Marginally Increased	126 (33.16)	33 (39.76)	159 (34.34)
3	Status quo / No change	173 (45.53)	21 (25.30)	194 (41.90)
4	Can't Say / Don't know	20 (5.26)	3 (3.61)	23 (4.97)
Total		380 (100.00)	83 (100.00)	463 (100.00)

Source: Field Data

*Figures in Parentheses are percentages to the total.

As per table 4 both in case of significant and marginal increase in their participation in household decision making BC women heads tops the list. About 31.33 per cent of BC women heads of PRIs reported significant increase in their participation in household decision making after becoming members of Panchayat Raj bodies. But it declined to 16.05 per cent in case of general BC women representatives who reported significant increase in their participation in household decision making. Nearly 39.76 per cent of BC women heads reported marginal increase in their participation in household decision making. However, it confined to 33.16 per cent in case of general BC women representatives. The membership of PRIs has no impact in their participation in household decision making on 45.53 per cent and 25.30 per cent of general BC women representatives and BC women heads of PRIs respectively.

IMPACT ON COPING CAPACITY TO HOUSEHOLD SHOCKS

The impact of PRI membership on sample women representatives in muddling through the household shocks is presented in table 5.

Table – 5
Impact of PRI membership on Coping Capacity to Household Shocks

Sl. No.	Responses	General BC women Representatives	BC women Heads of PRIs	Total
1	Significantly Increased	33 (8.68)	36 (43.37)	69 (14.90)
2	Marginally Increased	142 (37.37)	24 (28.92)	166 (35.85)
3	Status quo / No change	194 (51.05)	21 (25.30)	215 (46.44)
4	Can't Say / Don't know	11 (2.89)	2 (2.41)	13 (2.81)
Total		380 (100.00)	83 (100.00)	463 (100.00)

Source: Field Data

*Figures in Parentheses are percentages to the total.

It is clear from table 5 that as many as 72.29 per cent of BC women heads reported that the PRI membership has positive impact on coping capacity to Household Shocks. To be precise a preponderant majority i.e. 43.37 per cent of BC women heads of PRIs declared that their membership has significantly increased their coping capacity to Household Shocks. Nearly 28.92 per cent of them reported marginal increase in their coping capacity to Household Shocks. But in case of general BC women representatives the positive impact is confined to 46.05 per cent. Among general BC women representatives as many as 51.05 per cent stated that there is no change in their coping capacity to Household Shocks due to membership in PRIs. Negligible percentage of general BC women representatives and heads of PRIs denied responding.

IMPACT ON ECONOMIC SECURITY

The details of the impact of the PRI membership on economic security of sample women representatives is given in table 6.

Table – 6
Impact of PRI membership on Economic Security

Sl. No.	Responses	General BC women Representatives	BC women Heads of PRIs	Total
1	Significantly Increased	44 (11.58)	31 (37.35)	75 (16.20)
2	Marginally Increased	131 (34.47)	30 (36.14)	161 (34.77)
3	Status quo / No change	188 (49.47)	20 (24.10)	208 (44.92)
4	Can't Say / Don't know	17 (4.47)	2 (2.41)	19 (4.10)
Total		380 (100.00)	83 (100.00)	463 (100.00)

Source: Field Data *Figures in Parentheses are percentages to the total.

It is evident from table 6 that nearly 37.35 per cent of the sample BC women heads of PRIs reported that due to their membership in Panchayat Raj bodies their economic security is significantly increased. On the other hand nearly 34.47 per cent of general BC women representatives declared marginal increase in their economic security. With regard to status quo in economic security general BC women tops the list with 49.47 per cent. In case of BC women heads the percentage of women who reported status quo declined to 24.10 per cent. About 4.47 per cent of general BC women representatives and 2.41 per cent of BC women heads not responded.

SUBJECTION TO DOMINATION AND VIOLENCE

In rural India, women are subject to male domination and she is also subject to domestic and other violence. Table 7 depicts all such details.

Table –7
Impact of PRI membership on Subjection to Domination and Violence

Sl. No.	Responses	General BC women Representatives	BC women Heads of PRIs	Total
1	Significantly decreased	65 (17.11)	34 (40.96)	99 (21.38)
2	Marginally decreased	167 (43.95)	27 (32.53)	194 (41.90)
3	Status quo / No change	137 (36.05)	16 (19.28)	153 (33.05)
4	Can't Say / Don't know	11 (2.89)	6 (7.23)	17 (3.67)
Total		380 (100.00)	83 (100.00)	463 (100.00)

Source: Field Data

*Figures in Parentheses are percentages to the total.

Table 7 reveals that as many as 73.49 per cent of sample BC women heads of PRIs reported either significant or marginal decrease in subjection to domination and violence due to PRI membership. In case of general BC women representatives' positive impact is reported by 51.05 per cent of sample. More than one-third of general BC women representatives reported status quo in subjection to domination and violence. Nearly 19.28 per cent of BC women heads of PRIs reported status quo in subjection to domination and violence. 11 out of 380 general BC women representatives and 6 out of 83 women heads of PRIs not expressed their views on subjection to domination and violence.

AWARENESS ABOUT ON LAWS, RULES AND REGULATIONS

The details of the impact of the PRI membership on legal and political awareness is given in table 8.

**Table – 8
Impact of PRI membership on Political and Legal Awareness**

Sl. No.	Responses	General BC women Representatives	BC women Heads of PRIs	Total
1	Significantly Increased	44 (11.58)	42 (50.60)	86 (18.57)
2	Marginally Increased	182 (47.89)	24 (28.92)	206 (44.49)
3	Status quo / No change	133 (35.00)	12 (14.46)	145 (31.32)
4	Can't Say / Don't know	21 (5.53)	5 (6.02)	26 (5.62)
Total		380 (100.00)	83 (100.00)	463 (100.00)

Source: Field Data

*Figures in Parentheses are percentages to the total.

As per table 6.43 both in case of significant and marginal increase in political and legal awareness BC women heads tops the list. About 50.60 per cent of BC women heads of PRIs reported significant increase in their political and legal awareness after becoming members of Panchayat Raj bodies. But it sharply declined to 11.58 per cent in case of general BC women representatives who reported significant increase in their political and legal awareness. Nearly 28.92 per cent of BC women heads reported marginal increase in their political and legal awareness. However, it confined to 47.89 per cent in case of general BC women representatives. The membership of PRIs has no impact in their political and legal awareness on 35 per cent and 14.46 per cent of general BC women representatives and BC women heads of PRIs respectively.

FINDINGS

1. The study makes it clear that one-third of sample women reported no change in subjection to domination and violence. On the other hand 41.90 per cent of sample representatives reported marginal decrease and another 21.38 per cent reported significant decrease in subjection to domination and violence.
2. As per the study, 44.49 per cent of sample women reported marginal increase in their political and legal awareness. However, 31.32 per cent of sample women reported status quo in their political and legal awareness. In the same way 18.57 per cent stated significant increase in their political and legal awareness.

3. The study indicates that nearly 50.97 per cent of sample BC women stated that there is some amount of change in their economic security due to PRIs membership. Among them 34.77 per cent reported marginal increase and 16.20 per cent reported significant increase in their economic security. About 44.92 per cent of sample women declared that there is no change in their economic security after being members of PRIs.
4. The study reveals that nearly 50.75 per cent of BC women representatives reported that the PRI membership has positive impact on coping capacity to Household Shocks. Among them 35.85 per cent reported marginal increase and 14.90 per cent stated significant increase in their coping capacity to Household Shocks. The women who declared no change in coping capacity to Household Shocks is also quite alarming. Nearly 46.44 per cent of BC women representatives declared that there is no change in their coping capacity to Household Shocks.
5. As per the study 41.90 per cent of sample women reported status quo in their participation in household decision making. However, 34.34 per cent of sample women reported marginal increase in their participation in household decision making. In the same way 18.79 per cent stated significant increase in their participation in household decision making.
6. It is pertinent to note that one-third of sample women reported no change in their freedom of movement and their access to money. On the other hand 48.38 per cent of sample representatives reported marginal increase and another 9.29 per cent reported significant increase in their freedom of movement and their access to money.
7. The study reveals that nearly 54.43 per cent of BC women representatives reported that the PRI membership has positive impact on their controlling power over resources. Among them 29.59 per cent reported marginal increase and 24.84 per cent stated significant increase in their control over resources. The women who declared no change in their control over resources is also quite alarming. Nearly 40.39 per cent of BC women representatives declared that there is no change in their controlling power over resources.

CONCLUSION

Among various processes, women's participation in political institutions is viewed as highly empowering. In this connection, 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 was an historic event towards revitalisation of panchayati raj institutions in general and empowerment of SCs, STs and women in particular. The Act makes provision for the reservation of one-third of the total number of seats in panchayati raj institutions for women. This development resulted in constitutionally mandated 2,32,332 village panchayats, 6,000 intermediate panchayats and 534 zilla panchayats with a representative base of 27,75,858 panchayat members, 1,44,491 members of intermediate panchayats and 15,067 members of zilla panchayats. The importance of the change is evident from the fact that over half of these members belonged to traditionally marginalised and disadvantaged sections of society comprising of women (one -third of the total) and SCs, STs and OBCs (as per their proportion in total population of the area). This offered women a unique opportunity to occupy leadership positions and change conditions for their own development and empowerment. Thus, the new development prepared the environment in which women can gain not only social status, and self-confidence but fight successfully the centuries old oppression and exploitation.

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