

Women's Participation in Decentralize Democracy: A Critical Understanding

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ABSTRACT

In democratic government human rights are the fundamental principles. India is a biggest democratic nation within the world where people have the ultimate sources of power. It includes the political rights for both men and women. Women's equal participation in politics and the decision-making process is very necessary for sustaining the democracy of a country. Women constitute half of the world's population and without their active participation achieving and sustaining the democratic government is impossible. Women's participation in democratic governance is an important element in building a democracy and ensuring open, transparent and accountable decision making processes. This is essential for achieving gender equality in society. Traditionally women were facing many obstacles for their political participation. Women's involvement in the election process is necessary for eradicating the social barriers. Nowadays women are active participant and campaign activists, just like men. Through the process of liberalization, globalization and privatization India enter into the globalized world. For the development of society the decentralization process became necessary. India was adopted democratic decentralization for women with giving them 33 percent reservation which increases their participation in the political process. In 1992, the 73rd constitutional amendment was passed which established three tier system of governance such as gram sabha, panchayatsamiti and zillaparishad. Gram sabha brought democracy at doorstep which reserve a minimum of one third of seats for women.

Keywords: Decentralization, Democracy, Governance, Politics, Equality.

INTRODUCTION

The social, economic and political institutions should be fairly functional towards giving justice and quality life for every man and woman. To improve the condition of marginalized communities democracy brought instrumental changes. In a democratic country, people holds the ultimate power through their elected representatives. It mainly focused on equality, participation and accountability. In a democratic society, citizens have the rights to vote, express their opinions and contribute to the decision-making process. These basic freedom allow them for diverse voices and perspectives to shape policies and laws.

In contemporary period democracy as a debated issue has become an objective for every individual and nation around the world. It is a form of political representation based on the principle of popular sovereignty. In the

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17th century, democracy began to emerge, leading to the growing influence of parliament of Western Europe. Furthermore, it provided impetus through the French and American Revolutions in the 18th century. After the World War II, there was a wave of decolonization among the former colonies of European powers and a significant number of newly independent countries adopted parliamentary democracy. In the words of Larry Diamond, democracy refers to a free and fair system of choosing representatives, the active participation of people as citizens, safeguarding the human rights of all citizens and upholding the principles of the rule of law that universally applicable. Decentralization democracy, often referred to as local governance or grassroots democracy, is a corner stone of modern governance systems worldwide. It entails the transfer of political, administrative and fiscal powers from central authority to local institutions. In this context, one critical aspect that demands attention is the participation of women in decentralized democracy. The role of women in local governance is pivotal, as it not only fosters gender equality but also enhances the effectiveness and inclusivity of decentralized decision-making processes. This paper will critically examine the challenges and opportunities for women's participation on both the broader democratic system and at the local level. Decentralization is a process of distributing authority, decision making and individual freedom. It is a system or approach that involves the transfer of political power, decision-making authority and administrative responsibilities with the extension of democracy at grass-root level. It permits local governments to have more control over their own affairs. It often encourages people's participation in the local level decision making process. The Panchayati Raj program promotes people's participation in grass-root politics. Rajani Kothari in "Perspective on Decentralization" explain that rather than viewing Panchayati Raj merely as a development agent, it is crucial to see development as an instrument of Panchayati Raj, emphasizing the empowerment of people's governance. In "Rural Sociology in India" A. R. Desai explains that the village administration was conducted by the village panchayat, consisting of elected panchayat heads from the representatives of various castes, generally elder persons of castes or the head of village. For effective governance the participation of both men and women in political process is essential.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Historically, women have been underrepresented in political and governance system all over the world.

Through democratic decentralization women got an opportunity to take decision in rural governance which help them to eradicating gender disparity. The United Nations recognized the importance of women's participation in governance through the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which are crucial international instruments addressing gender equality and women's rights. These international agreements underscored the significance of women's voices in shaping policies and programs at all levels of government. In ancient civilizations women had no right to vote or hold offices. They were completely barred from politics. In the 17th to 18th century, the enlightenment period brought the idea about equality for women and human rights. Thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft advocated for women's rights and challenged the traditional gender role. In the 19th century the United States and the United Kingdom felt the emergence of suffrage and in 1848 marked a significant milestone in the fight to give voting rights for women. In 1893 New Zealand the self-governing country firstly gave voting right to women. In 1920, the United States and other countries followed the costume. In the 20th century women began to participate in politics. In 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the world's first female prime minister in Sri Lanka. During second wave feminism women's political participation increases. In this period women have equal rights in different sectors such as employment, education and reproductive rights. In late 20th century, for increasing women's participation in the governance system some countries executed quotas for them. During this period the opportunities for women in education and career increased due to economic liberalization and globalization process.

This research paper addresses following objectives.

- i. To explore the effectiveness of democracy has made in women's lives.
- ii. To study how PRI gave women social, economic, political power and voice.
- iii. To examine the challenges and opportunities confronting women representatives in their participation on both the democratic system and at the local level.

Status of women in Indian democracy

In today's changed global context women acquires an important section of public life and gender equality has

been approved as an elementary principle by many societies. The empowerment of women has been a continual discourse in India and beyond, with Indian women challenging and overcoming societal norms that once placed them in inferior positions. Women's empowerment is necessary for eradicating social, political and economic discrimination. In Indian status of democracy has progressed significantly over the years. In pre-independence period due to the social and cultural norms women's participation in politics had very limited and their roles in outside home had restricted. For the women's right leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant played a very important role in the freedom movement. After independence the constitution of India provided equal rights for women. The gained the right to participate in voting process and also stand for a position in political system. The women leaders like Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi and many more women held powerful political positions. Despite legal progress, gender disparities persisted in many areas. The 73rd and 74th Amendment made a significant change in the life of women. In the Indian constitution, provision for reserved seats for women in the Panchayati Raj system and urban local bodies have significantly heightened women's engagement in the political system. Nagendra Ambedkar in "Women and Panchayati Raj", explain that to achieve successful democratic politics in India women's participation and their contribution is very necessary. India as a democratic country allows all citizens equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. S.K. Sharma in his book "Functioning of Panchayats in India", mainly focuses on the functioning of Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads in India. It also explains the working of self-governance in the British period in India. Andre Beteille in "Empowerment" explain on the decision making process resources have been redistributed on the basis of capabilities. According to some authors the panchayati raj institution prevails from ancient India which consists of five elder persons in a village. They take all the decisions collectively and also take necessary steps to implement these decisions. After independence the panchayati raj institution actively functioning in rural India. Article 21 of human rights emphasizes the rights of individuals to participate in their country's governance system by selecting representatives of their choice freely. In India women have less representation in political system since independence. Regrettably, affirmative action and women's participation in India have encountered limitations, remaining predominantly confined to local

governance without substantial progress in broader contexts. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee proposed a three-tier hierarchical structure of panchayati raj institution which consists of Gram Panchayats at village level, Panchayat Samitis at sub-district level and Zilla Parishads at district level. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment bill passed in 1992 which mainly focused on setting up panchayati raj institutions in India. This Amendment provides 33 percent of elected seats for women at local political systems. There are also one-third of seats reserved for women in the post of chairperson in local governance. In India, due to reservation in politics women got an opportunity to take decision in rural governance. Their political empowerment creates an opportunity for them to take part in the development process. Women's empowerment through politics signifies a unique responsibility for them in shaping policies and impacting the decision making process through their incorporation into the political system. The empowerment of women, particularly in political sphere is crucial for their progress in a society that increases gender equality. After decentralization women's participation in panchayati raj institution had made a more extensive exploration of the role and operation of women in panchayati raj institutions across the country. Since the formation of local self-government in India, numerous studies, pieces of literature and official documents have been published exploring into various facets of the panchayati raj system. There are many research has taken place. Many scholars have been focusing their attention on women's grass-root level, women's empowerment and its impact on social and economic development. Some studies have also empirically dealt with the socio-economic and political background of women leaders and their role in PRIs. Some studies explain the success story of PRIs in which they acquire a platform for decision making at grass-root level. In a case study on village panchayats in Odisha, Snehalata Panda observed that majority of women who are participating in the political process having no political backgrounds. Their entry into this process is primarily attributed to the reservation policies in government. They develop their perception regarding politics, eagerness and maturity in their viewpoint. In 'Women and Panchayati Raj' Susheela Kaushik asserts that when women are actively take participation in decision making process in more number, such advancements have the potential to not only transform the lives of women but also reshape the functioning of public institutions. Up to this point, the numerical increase in women's representation in the formal

political sphere has not resulted in a substantive qualitative transformation. Based on the review, women's lower participation can be attributed to distinct socialisation patterns, particularly those influenced by expectations surrounding marriage. They relied on male family members, spouses or sons, with majority of them lacking literacy.

Constrained to Women's Participation

In grass-root level there may be a huge gap between rhetoric and realities, between what appears at the top in the manifest level and what happens exactly at the grass-root level. There may be a huge gulf between policy and practice between rhetoric and realities. Despite the global recognition of women's participation in decentralized democracy, women still face barriers such as gender bias, harassment, disparities in resources and unequal distribution of properties in various region globally.

- The major problem which creates obstacles to women's participation in grass-root politics and local governance is the patriarchal norms and gender stereotype system. Due to family responsibilities women are not engaging in the political process.
- Often women face disparities in access to education, information and monetary crisis which limits their effective participation in political campaigns or holding political offices.
- Often in local politics and village assemblies women's representation was very less. Sometimes tokenism prevails, where women are not actively participating in the political meetings rather their male counterparts attained the meetings. Due to reservation policy many women got elected into politics but they only act as the mouthpiece of their male family members.
- Due to discriminatory laws and practices women's participation in political processes are restricted which hamper their mobility or inheritance rights.
- Women in political life engaged the space because of reservation which increase their ability for the transformation of the gender biased society, But it is often argued that mere in legislature will be ineffective without the support of training programmes since the political space occupied by

women in masculine in nature, governed by patriarchal norms, values and practices.

Opportunities for women's participation

While challenges exist, there are also significant opportunities for women's participation in decentralization democracy.

- Reserved seats and Quotas: To increase women's participation in local governance many countries have implemented reservation seats and quotas for women.
- Empowerment programs: For the effective participation of women in local governance various organizations and government have taken initiatives to increase their abilities and awareness.
- Grass-root movements: Grass-root movements play an important role which mobilize women to take part in local politics and advocate for their rights.
- Information and technology: The digital media created new opportunities for women's participation in the political field. Social media and online campaigns play an important role to help them strengthen their voice in local politics.

Impact of women's participation

Women's participation in decentralized democracy has in-depth implications.

- Gender responsive policies: women's participation in local government frequently involves advocating for policies addressing gender specific issues like maternity health care, girl's education and combating gender based violence.
- Improve service delivery: women's participation in local politics leads to more effective and inclusive service delivery in areas such as education, healthcare and infrastructure development.
- Representation and role model: women's active engagement in the political process help them to become role models for future generations which inspire the girls to take part in politics and governance.
- Democratic legitimacy: inclusive participation enhances the legitimacy of democratic institutions,

reflecting the diversity of the population and fostering trust in the government.

CONCLUSION

Women's participation in democracy has come a long way from historical exclusion to achieving significant milestones in recent decades. While progress has been made, challenges persist and the ongoing fight for gender equality in politics remains a crucial global endeavor. The journey of women in democracy serves as a testament to the power of persistence and the pursuit of equal representation for all citizens. Women's involvement is not just a facet of gender equality but also a fundamental components of governance that is effective and inclusive. While challenges persist efforts to overcome them are essential for building more equitable and responsive local governments. The impact of women's participation goes beyond gender specific issues, influencing policies, service delivery and the overall legitimacy of democratic systems. As we move forward, it is imperative to continue supporting and promoting women's involvement in local governance to ensure a more just and representative society.

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