

A Micro Study of the Level of Empowerment and Knowledge of Elected Women Gram Pradhans in Agra District

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Abstract - Empowerment of women in all spheres of life i.e economic social and political is crucial for their advancement and for the foundation of gender equal society. It is central to the goals of equality, development and peace. Direct political participation of women in local governance is a central human right in itself and enables the realization of a host of other human rights. Political voice and decision-making power of women concerning basic services, economic development and social justice are critical factors in challenging and transforming structural discrimination of the caste, class and gender. The present paper is based on primary data, wherein, the villages with women pradhans were visited and an in-depth knowledge about their working knowledge status etc was acquired. The women pradhans were questioned with the help of an exhaustive questionnaire. We sincerely hope that there might be one day in the future when political, social and economic empowerment in the real sense would be achieved.

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions was made possible by the government through the historic 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992 which made mandatory 33 per cent reservation for women at every level. Further since 2009, the Union Cabinet of the Government of India approved 50 per cent reservation for women in Panchayat Raj Institutions. The states of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan and Tripura were the first to implement 50 per cent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Since the 73rd amendment five elections of Panchayats have been conducted and the results of the earlier and the latest 2015 elections in UP show that there is widespread polarization (State Election Commission, 2015). An analysis of involvement of women in PRIs shows that in majority of cases the women participation in general is more as a token i.e. the male leaders prop up wives or close female relatives as their surrogates and the actual powers and working rests with them only. However, a very small number of success stories are also evident in which the female representatives proved to be epitomes of women empowerment and carried out the Gram Pradhans responsibilities independently and infact much better than their male counterparts elsewhere.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present paper is based on primary data, wherein, the villages with women pradhans were visited and indepth knowledge about their working knowledge and status was acquired. The women pradhans were questioned with the help of an exhaustive questionnaire. The research methodology followed in this paper is as follows. There are in all 18 divisions in Uttar Pradesh, for the purpose of the study Agra division was selected. There are four district this distribution was placed in alphabetical order and the district at number one place was selected. As such Agra District emerged for the selection of development block in the selected district i.e. Agra. The list prepared by the State Election Commission was used. We drew a lottery from the list of 15 development blocks and in the process block at serial number six was selected. The block that emerged was Fatehpur Sikri.

TABLE 1-Selected Development Blocks In Uttar Pradesh

DIVISION	DISTRICT	BLOCK	GRAM PANCHAYAT
Agra Division	AGRA	Fatehpur Sikri	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undera • Badanpurwarnamay • Mai Bujurga • Gothara • Bhadekaula • Ninbaya • Jaajau • Dabar • SikricharHissa • Duraa

Finally, 10 villages from Fatehpur Sikri' block having women gram pradhans were the subject of the study for this paper. Out of the selected Elected Women Gram Pradhans (EWGPs), 02 were represented by SC women pradhans, 05 by OBC women pradhans and the remaining 03 were general women Gram Pradhans.

III. PANCHAYATI RAJ IN UTTAR PRADESH

Uttar Pradesh brought in Panchayati Raj immediately after independence through the enactment of the UP-Panchayat Raj Act, 1947. Following the recommendations of Balwant Rai Mehta Committee a three-tier system of Panchayats was established through the enactment of the U.P. Kshetra Samitis and Zilla Parishads Act, 1961 (now, renamed as UP Kshetra Panchayats and Zilla Panchayats Adhiniyam, 1961). Following the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act, 1992 in order to bring about conformity with the provisions of the Constitution, the Government of U.P. amended the aforesaid Acts, through the Uttar Pradesh Panchayat Laws (Amendment) Act, 1994.

The first Village Panchayat Act in Uttar Pradesh was enacted in 1920. Village level local bodies were set up to assist in the administration of civil and criminal justice, sanitation and other common concerns. However, the Panchs of the Panchayats set up under the Act were to be appointed by the Collector of the district, ruling out any chances of democratic self-government. Immediately after Independence, Uttar Pradesh enacted the United Provinces Panchayat Raj Act 1947 (also known as Uttar Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act, 1947), which was signed by the Governor General on 7th December, 1947 (Report, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GOI.). Under this Act, three bodies were created Gaon Sabha, Gaon Panchayat, and Panchayat Adalat or Nyaya Panchayats. To begin with, around 35,000 Gaon Panchayats and 8,000 Nyaya Panchayats started functioning for nearly 5.4 crore (the then) rural population of Uttar Pradesh. Since then, the Panchayati Raj Institution has strengthened and grown with time. The 2010, 2015 elections of PRI saw a remarkable contribution of women in the electoral process throughout India and also in Uttar Pradesh.

IV. POLITICAL CAREER OF WOMEN PRADHANS

Empowerment of women is an important issue all over the world. This concept has its roots in the women's movement throughout the world. Empowerment as a concept was first introduced at the International Women's Conference in 1985 at Nairobi. In India despite many efforts by the Government for the women empowerment the real situation remains wildly skewed as still there is a wide and worrying gap between the political opportunities before Indian women and the lack of social and economic options which are reflected in their human development indicators. The sex ratio is highly imbalanced and stands at 944 to 1000 according to 2011 census; India ranks out of 144 countries according to the Global Gender Gap Index 2015 which is just six positions higher compared to 2014.

Direct political participation of women in local governance is a central human right in itself and enables the realization of a host of other human rights. It has important implications for the broader arena of governance in any country. Political voice and decision-making power of women concerning basic services, economic development and social justice are critical factors in challenging and transforming structural discrimination of the caste, class and gender, and enabling them to realize their fundamental rights. Political participation also demands accountability from state and non-state functionaries to guarantee and respect women's equal political voice and development. This requires a transformation of power relationships both within institutions of governance and in the women's social environment. Empowerment of women will not be possible unless they are provided proper representation in the political system.

Various factors influence the opportunities available for women to enter into politics, Panchayati Raj Institution being the lowest rung of the democratic system in India, the participation of women in PRIs is very important. This study observed and analyzed various aspects of the political careers of Women Gram Pradhans, their age, motivating factors, awareness of duties and rights and then knowledge of government, schemes, grants and funds. Reservation has given an opportunity to women of unprivileged groups in society who were aspiring for a political career but were in need of their first break. In this regard, the 73rd amendment proved to be a revolutionary step in the right direction although the women who have come forward to contest elections have had to face a lot of problems not only politically, but also socially. Now it has become compulsory for men to allow women to come forward and contest elections although the reins of power are vested in men folk only.

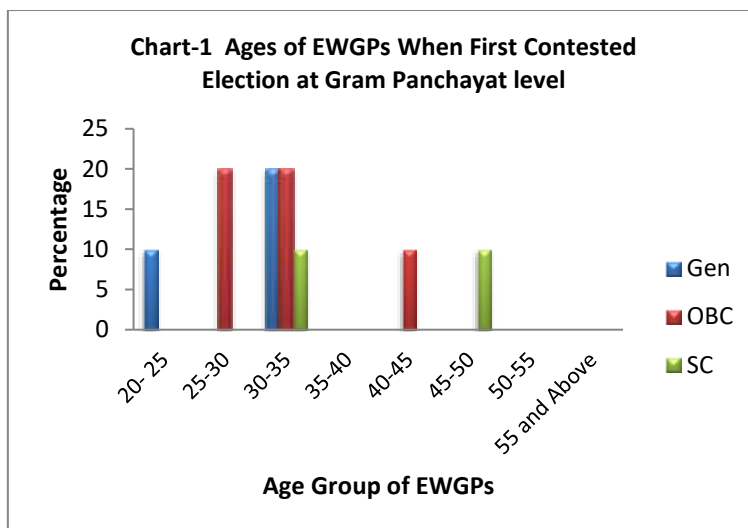
V. AGE OF ELECTED WOMEN GRAM PRADHANS

The age at which women first entered politics also plays a vital role in their level of empowerment and their role as Gram Pradhans.

TABLE 2 - Age Wise Distribution of EWGPs (Per cent)

Percentage of Women Gram Pradhan				
Age	Gen	OBC	SC	Total
20- 25	10	-	-	10
25-30	-	20	-	20
30-35	20	20	10	50
35-40	-	-	-	-
40-45	-	10	-	10
45-50	-	-	10	10
50-55	-	-	-	-
55 and Above	-	-	-	-
Total	30	50	20	100

The primary data collected shows that 50 per cent EWGPs entered in active politics and contested their first election at the age between 30-35 years while 20 per cent EWGPs contested election between 25-30 years.



The study shows that women representatives prior association with any form of politics was low and the provision of reservation played a very conclusive role in encouraging women to contest panchayat elections and brought many of them in the foray. Percentage of SC EWGPs in the group 25-30 years was 20 per cent as compared to 30 per cent for general category and 50 per cent for OBC category. It shows greater eagerness among marginalized group's younger generations to enter the politics. (Table 2)

National politics does not play a major role at village level; however local politics is always important even in the smallest of villages, the affiliation of the family with the influential persons of the village, block or the district decides the fate of the elected women representatives in general and Gram Pradhan in particular. It was observed in the study that out of 10 selected Women Gram Pradhans only 1 i.e 10 per cent have stated that the decision to contest the election was entirely their own. In 68 per cent cases it was the husband who decided that his wife will contest the election. In remaining 22 per cent cases, the decision was of other members of the family like father-in-law, brother, son etc. Thus, the whole process of the election was male dominated by proxy.

Further 58 per cent said they did not face any problem at the time of filing their first nomination as the whole process was completed by their spouses or other family members. They simply put their thumb impressions or their signatures on the papers. Among the major constraints faced were the lack of financial resources (28 per cent) political rivalry of their spouse or family member (08 per cent), low educational level (14 per cent) and resistance related to caste or religion (09 per cent).

The survey revealed that 17-18 per cent of EWGPs convinced members of the community or the household to give them their support and 12 per cent mobilised funds through relatives, friends or the community to meet election expenses. EWGPs who have served more than one term were further questioned about how, in their perception and with reference to the most recent election, these constraints had changed over a period of time. Around 57 per cent of them confirmed that there was a change, though 16 per cent said that it has remained the same. The gender difference on this issue was not significant as elected male Pradhans also shared the same point of view.

VI. DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS OF VILLAGES UNDER THE STEWARDSHIP OF WOMEN

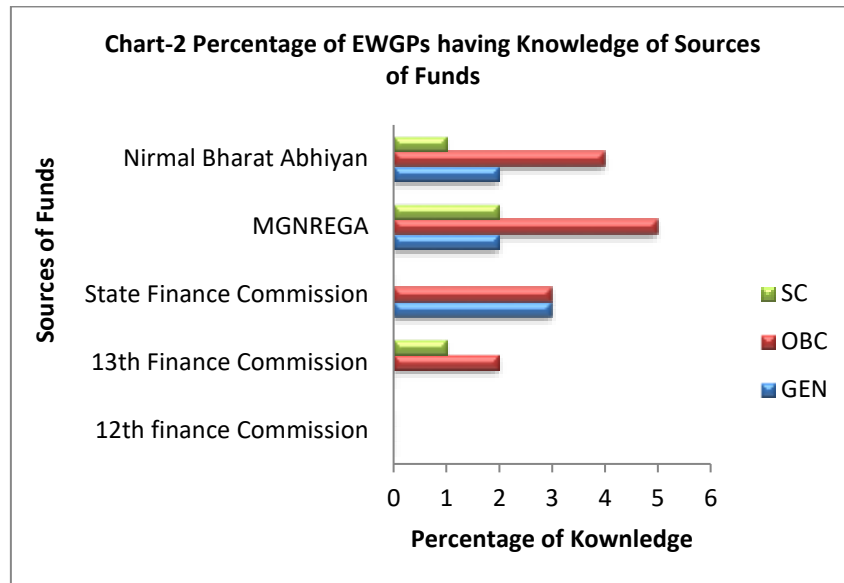
The present study focused on the development aspect of the village in relation to the deployment of the government funds. The EWGPs were asked about knowledge of various government programmes and schemes. When asked about the resources of the funds received from the government for the development of villages, only about 20 per cent of the EWGPs could explain the exact nature of the source of funds. 18.75 per cent of general category, 31.5 per cent of OBC category and 13.33 per cent of SC category Women Gram Pradhan could spell out the exact source of the funds. In 78 per cent cases, the general answer was "सरकारसे आता है!" "Received from the Government".

TABLE 3. Percentage of Women Gram Pradhans Having Knowledge of Sources of Funds (Per cent)

S. No	Sources of Funds	GEN	OBC	SC	Overall
1	12 th finance Commission	-	-	-	-
2	13 th Finance Commission	-	20	10	30
3	State Finance Commission	30	30	-	60
4	MGNREGA	20	50	20	90
5	Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan	20	40	10	70

Only as table 3 shows, only 30 per cent of the EWGPs were aware of the funds received by the 13th Finance Commission. 60 per cent out of which 30 per cent from general category and 30 per cent from OBC category know about the State Finance Commission. The funds coming for MGNREGA was known to almost 90 per cent of the EWGPs. As regards funds under the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan, 20 per cent of General category, 40 from OBC and only 10 per cent of SC EWGPs know about it.

The Gram Panchayats do not have adequate financial resources of their own. Mobilization of local resources is almost negligible, about 95 per cent of the Gram Panchayats receive income from grants- in- aid in the form of devolution from the state on the recommendation of the State Finance Commission and from centre and state governments from sponsored schemes. Besides this 12th and 13th Finance Commission recommended the devolution of resources to the Gram Panchayats.



The 12th Finance Commission had recommended grants amounting to Rs. 20000 crores payable during the period 2005-10 for Panchayats to states. It was stipulated in the recommendations that grant should be used to improve the service delivery by the Panchayats in respect of water supply and sanitation. Panchayats were expected to encourage taking over water supply assets created under Swajal Dhara Programme with the help of these grants.

The 13th Finance Commission realized that a sizable rural population especially the SCs and STs are deprived of clean and wholesome water supply and sanitation. The accelerated rural water supply programme, the total sanitation campaign and the Nirmal Gram Panchayat scheme have made a significant difference in the lives of rural people.

The sources of revenue for the Gram Panchayat comprise of

1. Grants assigned under the recommendation of 12th and 13th Finance Commission.
2. 5 per cent of the net proceeds of state's net tax revenue as per recommendation of the 2nd State Finance Commission.
3. Grants received through District Rural Development Agency for execution of centrally sponsored scheme such as MGNREGA.
4. Funds from departments for the functions transferred to the Panchayats.

The Gram Pradhans in Uttar Pradesh receive the grants for the implementation of following centrally sponsored scheme.

1. MGNREGA
2. Mid-Day Meal Scheme
3. Scholarship to Primary and Upper Primary classes' students
4. 11th Finance Commission
5. 12th Finance Commission
6. State Finance Commission
7. Rural Health and Sanitation
8. Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan

Unfortunately, no respondents could tell that their Gram Panchayats received some funds under 12th Finance Commission, and 30 per cent were able to disclose that their Gram Panchayats received funds under the 13th Finance Commission. But none of the respondents was able to explain the concept and functions of Finance Commission as stipulated in the Constitution of India. They were also not aware of the nature of funds distributed by the State Finance Commission.

VII. CONCLUSION

It can be said that functioning of the EWGPs has had no direct impact on the standard of living of the people of the village. The performance was same as in the case of male gram pradhans. In two of the ten villages studied the Elected Women Gram Pradhans were able to make their presence felt. They were able to influence people, took active role in meetings with BDOs, VDOs and other Government officials and tried to take decision on their own. The rest of the EWGPs simply played in the hands of their husbands and could not influence the prevailing political environment in the village.

Nevertheless, the impact of participation of women in PRI development as revealed by the study showed that:

- The positive impact of entering politics and working as a Panchayati Raj functionary was evident since a large proportion of EWGPs reported enhancement in their self-esteem confidence and decision-making ability.
- Becoming a Pradhan led to increased respect within the family as well as in the community at large. EWGPs also perceived an increased voice in decisions related to economic matters and other issues in their family.
- Beyond the household domain, and in the professional environment, an increase in attention from local government responsiveness of the Block Panchayat and recognition from other Panchayat Members was reported by some EWGPs.

- A supportive professional environment evidently motivates EWGPs to perform better, as more than 50% reported an increase in their interaction with line departments and parallel bodies. Even the participation of common women citizens in various activities such as attending Gram Sabha meeting, etc. increased in the presence of EWGPs.

However, in order to bring all the women force in the mainstream of development they should be made more conscious of their rights, their duties as well as the benefits that they can enjoy which are meant for them. They must be more politically conscious to ensure their complete participation in democracy. Thus, women have to be made more aware about their empowerment. Education plays a very significant role in this direction. Organizing camps, programmes on television and radio can bring a revolutionary change in the attitude, behavior and working of elected women representatives. The government as well the NGOs can come forward to enlighten the rural women about their rights, about the framework of Panchayats and other institutions so that there is more active participation of rural women in democracy. This will no doubt help in making the objective of inclusive growth realistic, when the rural women will be empowered enough to understand their need in participation in democracy and confident enough to take their own decision, then we sincerely hope that there might be one day in the future when reservation may not be required to bring about women participation in democracy.

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