

# The Emerging Leadership of Rural Women in New Panchayats

Mona Kaushal

## **Abstract**

*The history of local governance as a catalyst for socio, economic, cultural and political transformation is as old as Indian civilization itself. Realizing the potential of the Panchayati Raj system, the Government of India made a landmark Amendment to the Constitution designed to democratise and empower local political bodies. The central aim of this paper is to share the enriching and variable experiences of Rural Women in the system of rural local self-government for rural development after the 73rd Amendment, which has become a watershed in deepening democracy and evolution of a third tier of constitutionally guaranteed stratum of government in India. The paper captures their experience and explores the participation, performance, constraints, aspirations, supports of various social institutions and their performance.*

**Keywords:** rural development, 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment, rural women, panchayats, empowerment.

## **1. Introduction and Evolution of Women's Representation in Panchayats.**

The 73rd amendment has mandated representation of at least one-third women through elections instead of the earlier token one or two women nominated by government or co-opted by the predominantly influential, powerful male membership/leadership of these panchayats. The reservation is of at least one-third membership and chairpersons' positions in panchayats at all the three levels. Further, this reservation is not only in the total membership but also within those reserved for the SC/ST thus providing for women's reservation across castes and class. Thus, now all Panchayats at every level will have at least one-third women members, (they can contest for other seats too), and at least one-third of Panchayats at each level - district to village- will be headed by women chairpersons. This mandated minimum one-third reservation has thus legitimated entry of women in a critical mass in mainstream politics at the grass root level in the whole country and has created political space for women across caste and class (Bhargava and Subha, 1994). It is a major step for inclusive politics and addressing as it does their continued political marginality. It is hoped that a new paradigm of political participation would emerge and the new situation would witness a drastic change in the distributive systems of benefits (Buch, 1998).

Given the above background, the paper discusses the impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, which not only gave a new lease of life to the panchayat system of India but also ensured at least 33 per cent of the total

seats at the three tiers of local governments—both rural and urban areas for women.

It is the contention of the paper that the 73rd Amendment has led to:

1. **Empowerment** of Women both in the panchayats as well as in the rural areas of India. Empowerment has been defined here as change of self-perception through knowledge.
2. Tremendous **mobilization** of women in the countryside changing the numerical configuration of local government.

## **2. Research Methodology**

For the proposed study both the primary and secondary data sources were used. The primary data was collected through questionnaire and interview method to study the emerging leadership of rural women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in the state of Haryana. The district of Ambala was chosen for the purpose of study. As per 2011 census, 55.62 % population of Ambala districts lives in rural areas of villages. The total Ambala district population living in rural areas is 632,243 of which males and females are 334,564 and 297,679 respectively. In rural areas of Ambala district, sex ratio is 890 females per 1000 males. From the Ambala district, out of 7 blocks, 1 block on the basis of population was randomly selected namely Ambala Rural-I. Further out of this block the study covered 4 villages and the sample consisted of 30 respondents drawn from each village which comes to a total 120. Questionnaire was personally administered to the respondents and Interviews were conducted.

The secondary data was collected through the review of literature, books, magazines, periodicals and journals. The collected data was analysed. The findings were tabulated and interpreted.

## **3. Assessing the Impact**

Has the formal change brought by the institutional intervention of reservations adequately addressed women's marginality or has it only led to their numerically expanded presence? Has the numerical presence transformed these structures, made them more receptive to women's needs and concerns or has patriarchy already succeeded in defeating the intentions of the amendment? The study looks at women's experience in their new political role, the processes of change, the earlier transition phase for women's political presence, problems of participation, potential, support of families, communities and other social collectives, and whether this new presence and experience have impact and empowering effect? Are rural women in India beginning to break their silence, to question, to gain confidence, to gain access and control over material and knowledge resources, altering self- image after entering the newly re-elected panchayats? The results were encouraging. A number of myths about these

women were exploded. Initially when the constitutional change took place, there was wide-spread skepticism; however, two decades of experience have shattered all the myths. The key areas on which the study focused and their corresponding results have been summarized in the following paragraphs:

### 3.1 Women's Awareness and Knowledge about Panchayat Related Matters:

There have been continued perceptions of women's lack of awareness and knowledge about panchayat related matters. The study explored this aspect and looked at their knowledge about reservations, Panchayats powers and responsibilities, Panchayat meetings, attendance of elected representatives, resources of Panchayats, their views about raising resources and also about the level of success of development schemes. The results tabulated below (Table 1) clearly show that a majority of women have good awareness level about Panchayat related matters. Expectedly, the chairpersons have higher level of awareness and knowledge than the members.

**Table 1: Performance of the women representatives as leaders in PRIs**

Responses	Ranks	Aware of their powers and duties	Aware of development issues	Aware of problems faced by people	Proxy candidate
Gender	Male	12(20%)	8(13.3%)	28(46.6%)	12(20%)
	Female	20(33.3)	8(13.3%)	24(40%)	8(13%)
Education Qualifications	Below Graduate	24(40%)	12(20%)	8(13.3%)	16(26.6%)
	Graduate and above	16(26.6%)	8(13.3%)	28(46.6%)	8(13.3%)

### 3.2 Level of Participation in Panchayats:

Elected representatives are expected to work for their constituents. Mandated reservation is only the beginning of their presence. Their effective participation would require not only attendance in meetings but also articulation, joining discussion, taking up issues and solving problems brought to them. The study looked at women's participation in panchayats in terms of attendance in meetings, time spent in panchayat work, efforts made for carrying their view point in the panchayat meetings, petitions/problems received by them and efforts made to over come difficulties. The common perception that almost all of them or at least the majority do not attend panchayat meetings and the doubts about the extent to which women can or really care to participate in panchayats was found to be false since majority of respondents(60%) felt that they participated effectively; the responses have been summarized in the following Table:

**Table 2: Participation of women representatives in PRIs**

Responses	Ranks	Participate actively	Unable to spare time to participate	Lack of self confidence	Passive spectators in PR meetings
Gender	Male Female	32(53.3%) 36(60%)	8(13.3%) 12(20%)	12(20%) 4(6.6%)	8(13.3%) 8(13.3%)
Education Qualifications	Below Graduate Graduate and above	20(33.3%) 36(60%)	12(20%) 8(13.3%)	12(20%) 8(13.3%)	16(26.6%) 8(13.3%)

**3.3 Performance of the Women Representatives:**

The general myth about women being mere spectators in the functioning of these institutions and being *de-jure* heads stands exploded. The results of the study clearly demonstrate that women not only take up issues relating to basic needs like drinking water, sanitation, availability of doctors and teachers etc in the villages, which is dear to them, but also general developmental activities in the area concerned. (Table 3)

**Table 3: The performance of women representatives in PRIs due to:**

Responses	Ranks	To prove as leaders of PRIs	Full cooperation from male representatives and officials	Aware of local development issues	Act as proxy
Gender	Male Female	20(33.3%) 20(33.3%)	12(20%) 12(20%)	24(40%) 16(26.6%)	4(6.6%) 12(20%)
Education Qualifications	Below Graduate Graduate and above	24(40%) 20(33.3%)	4(6.6%) 12(20%)	12(20%) 20(33.3%)	20(33.3%) 8(13.3%)

**3.4 Community Perceptions about Panchayat Women's Performance:**

The community's perceptions about women's new role and performance should also give valuable insights into the processes of change, the transformative index and the sign posts of this long journey towards women's empowerment and contribution to deeper democratic process. More than 50% of the community members have positive view about women representatives and hope that under their leadership corruption and favoritism will be reduced. Others, of course have negative opinion that they are incapable, non-cooperative, do not seek cooperation of higher level politicians and development functionaries, do not get any cooperation of other members, and they are illiterate, etc. Their responses

indicate that more than half of them feel that the panchayats functioning with the new elections and women's entry is satisfactory. They receive cooperation, there is understanding among themselves and that they are honest (Table 4,5)

**Table 4: Effectiveness of women leadership in PRIs**

Responses	Ranks	Effective	Ineffective	Socially acceptable	Socially unacceptable
Gender	Male	32(53.3%)	4(6.6%)	24(13.3%)	0
	Female	32(53.3%)	12(20%)	12(20%)	4(6.6%)
Education Qualifications	Below Graduate	20(33.3%)	12(33.3%)	24(40%)	4(6.6%)
	Graduate and above	36(60%)	8(46.6%)	16(26.6%)	0

**Table5: Satisfaction with leadership of women representation in PRIs**

Responses	Ranks	To a large extent	To some extent	Not at all	Can't say
Gender	Male	4(6.6%)	44(73.3%)	0	12(20%)
	Female	16(26.6%)	24(40%)	4(6.6%)	16(26.6%)
Education Qualifications	Below Graduate	4(6.6%)	24(40%)	0	32(53.3%)
	Graduate and above	16(26.6%)	32(53.3%)	4(6.6%)	8(13.3%)

### **3.5 The Issue of Proxy Women:**

It is often alleged that since many of the women are first-timers and are illiterate, they depend on their men folk for conducting the panchayat activities. In other words, the women follow their men folk without understanding the implications. Hence, they are termed as proxy women. The study tried to explore this issue and the results were encouraging. It was found that the proxy women are seen as proxies only in the first one or two years of their tenure, gradually they become independent and come to know about many modern institutions like courts, block development, agriculture and other offices, the existence of various officials. Nonetheless, women in panchayats weave many dreams and their self-perception changes when they realize the immense potential of the public sphere. Evidence shows that the villagers also recognize their potential (Table 6, 7, 8) Even if women chiefs depend on their husbands, the power relation between husband and wife has already changed because of reservations, particularly because the husband gets a chance to come to the public sphere because of the wife; the patriarchy is no longer monolithic and in many cases the husband even supports the wife and helps her in her domestic work also.

**Table6: Increase in the leadership qualities among women representatives in the PRIs**

Responses	Ranks	To a large extent	To some extent	Not at all	Can't say
Gender	Male	24(40%)	28(46.6%)	4(6.6%)	4(6.6%)
	Female	16(26.6%)	28(40%)	0	16(26.6%)
Education Qualifications	Below Graduate	12(20%)	32(53.3%)	0	16(26.6%)
	Graduate and above	20(33.3%)	32(53.3%)	0	8(13.3%)

**Table 7: Frequency of visits to their areas**

Responses	Ranks	Very frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Gender	Male	20(33.3%)	28(46.6%)	8(13.3%)	4(6.6%)
	Female	8(26.6%)	24(40%)	20(33.3%)	0
Education Qualifications	Below Graduate	0	20(33.3%)	36(60%)	4(6.6%)
	Graduate and above	20(33.3%)	28(46.6%)	12(20%)	0

**Table 8: Behaviour of women leaders while interacting with people**

Responses	Ranks	Behave confidently	Lack of confidence and shy	Show lack of interest in people's problems	Great concern for people's problems
Gender	Male	32(53.3%)	4(6.6%)	8(13.3%)	16(26.6%)
	Female	24(40%)	16(26.6%)	4(6.6%)	16(26.6%)
Education Qualifications	Below Graduate	12(20%)	36(60%)	12(20%)	0
	Graduate and above	32(53.3%)	8(13.3%)	4(6.6%)	16(26.6%)

### 3.6 Constraints

The constraints are many. In many places the women are not immune to systemic corruption, though as beginners they are more cautious. Coming into politics is still considered as dirty and spurned. The community leaders of the village try to choose candidates who are non-performers. The women themselves don't come forward. It is always the family members or party leaders who push them to contest. The selection of seats for reservations, which are done on a lottery basis and only for one term, doesn't provide much scope for nurturing a constituency. Even if the women perform during the first term, they are not allowed by the men to contest from the same seat again. Some of them get frustrated and become depressed. As mentioned before, the panchayat

institutions are used as an implementing agency so the bureaucrats feel that they are the boss and the first-timer female elected representatives are there to obey them. Violence against women has increased. The responses received have been tabulated in Table 9:

**Table 9: Main constrains in the way of women leaders in the PRIs**

Responses	Ranks	Lack of awareness of powers	Male representatives and officials do not trust their competence	Unable to spare time	Face gender discrimination
Gender	Male	24(40%)	12(20%)	16(26.6%)	8(13.3%)
	Female	8(13.3%)	24(40%)	8(13.3%)	20(33.3%)
Education Qualifications	Below Graduate	12(20%)	4(6.6%)	20(33.3%)	24(40%)
	Graduate and above	16(26.6%)	16(26.6%)	12(20%)	16(26.6%)

#### 4. Findings and Conclusions:

The present study is an effort to comprehend the empowerment of women at the grass root level of governance in Ambala. The various aspect of women empowerment have been **examined and analysed**; and can be finally **summarised** as:

1. The reservation for women in the PRIs was considered as a welcome step and had been accepted by the citizens.
2. The main advantage of reservation for women representatives had been the advancement in their social prestige and self-confidence.
3. Reservation has provided an opportunity to women representatives to prove their leadership qualities.
4. Through participation in PRIs, women representatives had an opportunity to express their views.
5. Reservation for women in PRIs had given them an opportunity to participate in local affairs and had brought forward women leaders who were much aware of the development issues of their area.
6. The viewpoint that being a woman was a handicap in the way of electing the leaders had been rejected.
7. Women representatives were responding to the local problems have been agreed by the citizens.
8. Another significant inference drawn from the data was that women representatives had a strong desire to remain politically active.
9. The citizens had approved the provision of reservation for women and had taken it as a welcome step.

10. The citizens were strongly agreed that women representatives were aware of the development issues of their area.
11. The officials were of the opinion that lack of awareness of powers and duties was the biggest problem faced by women leaders.
12. The officials were of the view that success of the PRIs depended on the coordination between the male representatives and women representatives and their working together was essential for the development.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment has thus, created an opportunity for large number of rural women to take part in the public institutions. Democracy has become more participatory in the process of implementing it. In many places, women have been functioning well and have engendered the development process, although in a limited sense. We see rural women's new leadership emerging in these grass roots institutions. Data on their perceptions, recognition, respect, enhanced status, confidence levels, increased political aspirations and community's perceptions clearly shows this change taking place. The family has accepted the new role and even the relationship between husband and wife has been altered. Many myths get disproved, according to the study. The husband-wife relationship has become relatively more egalitarian. This has led to a mobilization of rural women to a great extent. The elected women prove to be the role model for the village women. Thus we find that the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment has an empowering impact on the women and the entry of women into politics in such a big way is in itself a radical change. Despite the constraints, they are playing an extremely important role, which needs to be recognized and a clear beginning has been made in this direction. Women of today are no longer content to remain peripheral actors and want to play their rightful role in all sphere of life. There is no doubt that elections to PRIs has brought local women to the fore, who are showing enough maturity to closely align themselves with the political power structure, however, yet women's participation is not entirely visible and effective as their contributions are often undermined. The dire need is to remove disparity between women's formal political equality and their meaningful exercise of political power. Achieving the goal of equal participation of men and women in decision making will provide a balance that that would more accurately reflect in the composition of the society. It will expand the range of human resources available to meet the needs of society. At present the increasing participation of women in political arena will be a source, as well as signal for social change.

### **Bibliography**

Chandra, S. K. (July-September 1999). Women and Empowerment. *Indian Journal of Public Administration* , 43.

- Deshmukh, N. (April-June, 2005). Women Empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institution: A case study of Wambari Gram in Maharashtra”, *“Indian Journal of Public Administration”*, 51(2).
- Hazel, D. L. ( 1983.). *Women in Local Government”*, . New Delhi: Concept Publishing.
- Jayanti, C. “. ( 2001, june). Empowering Women. *Yojana* , p. 45.
- Kaushik, S. (1993). *Women and Panchayati Raj*. New Delhi: Har Anand Publications.
- Kumari, A. a. (1998). *Crossing the Sacred Line: Women’s Search for Political Power*. Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Mamie, S. S. (1982, November- December). The Status of Women in Local Governments: An International Assessment. *Public Administration Review* .
- Manikyamba, P. (1992). *Women in Panchayati Raj Structures*. New Delhi: Gyan Publications.
- Mathew, G. (1994). *Panchayati Raj- From Legislation to Movement*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Narain, Y. S. (January-March 2005). Political Empowerment of Women. *Indian Journal of Public Administration* , 51(1).
- Narsimhan, S. (1999). *Empowering Women: An Alternative Strategy for Rural India*. New Delh: Sage Publications.
- Nayak, S. a. (2005). *Women Empowerment in India*. Jaipur: Pointer Publishers.
- Palanithurai, G. (. (1996). *Empowering People: Issues and Solutions*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers.
- Tapan, N. (2000). *Need for Women Empowerment*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication.