

Measurement of women's political participation at the local level in India

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Abstract

The on-going decentralization process in India, which was initiated through the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Indian Constitution gives greater responsibilities and powers to the *Panchayats* (group of one or more villages in rural areas) and *Nagar Palikas* (municipality in urban areas) as the third tier of governance, offers new opportunities for local level planning, effective implementation and monitoring of various social and economic development programmes in the country. This will, in turn, help all the sections of the society particularly the weaker sections including women to take part and to share the responsibility of governance and development at least at the sub-district levels in the states.

As per the provisions of Article 243 D of the Constitution, one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in *Panchayats* (local self-Government) at all levels and also those of the Chairpersons are reserved for women. Even some States like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tripura and Uttarakhand have legislated for 50% reservation for women. In Sikkim, reservation for women is 40%. As a result of this initiative, out of about 28 lakh elected members in Panchayats, around 10 lakh are women. The last 15 years of Panchayati Raj in India have seen women go from strength to strength in terms of their political participation.

To empower Elected Women Representatives instructions have been issued to all States/UTs and other Central Ministries implementing all the Centrally Sponsored Schemes (by Government of India) as follows:

- (i) All the States / UT Governments may impress upon *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRIs) to ensure the safety of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) / Female *Sarpanches* (elected village head), particularly those belonging to the weaker sections. They should not be physically harmed, assaulted or humiliated in any manner on any count. Discrimination of any kind against them should not be allowed to remain unheeded and resolved expeditiously.
- (ii) To put a curb on the cases of proxy attendance by relatives of women EWRs, States have been advised to initiate departmental proceedings against the officers in whose presence such meetings are held.
- (iii) To advise the concerned authorities of PRIs that meeting of *Mahila Sabha* / *Palli Sabha* (ladies congregation) be held prior to *Gram Sabha* Meeting (village meeting) and recommendations / decisions of *Mahila Sabhas* mandatorily transmitted to *Gram Sabhas* who should consider the proposals imperatively.
- (iv) In the quorum of *Gram Sabha*, inclusion of at least half of the number of women voters should be mandated. States which have not mandated such a provision should do so.

(v) PRIs should be involved in any Integrated Plan of action to prevent and combat women trafficking, problems in disturbed areas, displacement due to land acquisition etc. Related matters may be taken up in *Mahila Sabha* in case of issues of children and women.

The National Statistical Commission (NSC), headed by Dr. C. Rangarajan, while reviewing the National Statistical System made a number of recommendations regarding the basic statistics for local level planning in its report (2001). It stressed on need to develop a system of regular collection of data on a set of core variables. With a view to conceptualize the system, the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation (MoSPI) constituted a high level expert committee headed by a Member, Planning Commission in 2004. The report of the expert committee submitted to the Government of India in 2006 provided a broad framework for undertaking a schematic approach to get the data collected and compiled through the PRI mechanism for the rural areas. The Ministry on the advice of the Planning Commission launched a nation-wide pilot scheme in 2008-09 to establish the availability of desired data from identifiable sources with a view to study the need, financial implications and data sources. The findings of the pilot have been disseminated in the form of a report, already uploaded on the Ministry's website (www.mospi.gov.in).

Presently, there is no systematic approach for validation of the scattered data. Further, transmission system from the block/district level to state/central level is not very robust and timely thus making the available data not usable for any local level planning purposes. The real-time data from local level may augment the existing database to provide crucial inputs for micro level planning for all the villages and Panchayats (a group of 2 or more villages) of the country and thus facilitating the formulation of realistic and effective developmental plans at local area level.

The quantitative data of political participation of women at local level is available but the qualitative data on the aspects of their active participation including the utilisation of the decision-making functionality provided to them is not being quantified properly. Although, the legislature has enabled their huge presence into the state of affairs, but their valuable essence into the system is yet to be established at most of the places. The data on their sensitization about their rights and its usage is still missing.

Data on women headed households, women health based data like, number of live births, still births and deaths, number of deaths of women, number of pregnant women, total number of marriages, number of sex workers, incidence of violence against women, etc. is collected by different agencies, but the worth of women in Indian politics, especially at local level is still uncanvassed.

The data on political participation of women is of immense use of planners and policy makers to evolve better schemes and programmes, which can be better implemented by women at local level. Women participating in politics have a better understanding of women based issues and their awareness about the know-how's of government functioning render better solutions to the society in terms of bring about gender equity in the country. Once the qualitative data on women participation in politics is captured and analysed properly, the planners may give shape to more programmes on women empowerment to enhance the radiating effects of women empowerment.

Proper Gender budgeting has already been worked out for inclusive growth of women & girls by ear-marking one third budget for the women in all the schemes. With more responsive

data on women participation in different spheres of society, better Gender Budget initiatives aim to move the country in the direction of Gender responsive Budget, a move towards gender equal society.