



WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS: SOME CASE STUDIES FROM JAMMU AND KASHMIR AND HIMACHAL PRADESH

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[This research paper is based on the findings of the Research Project that has been sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi]

Abstract:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has led to the emergence of women leadership at grassroots level that has changed the picture of rural governance in India. It has provided an opportunity to large number women to occupy political space in rural self-governing bodies by mandating 33 per cent reservation to women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was implemented by all the states including Himachal Pradesh but the only exception was the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. Jammu and Kashmir continues with its own Panchayati Raj Act that denied the opportunity to women to occupy leadership positions in villages. This situation changed only recently when the government of Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir implemented all the provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment and completed all the tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions for the very first time in 2020. In contrast to this, Himachal Pradesh has been regularly conducting panchayat elections as per the provisions of 73rd Constitutional Amendment and presently about 58 per cent women are now elected in panchayats of Himachal Pradesh. The present research paper has made an effort to capture the experiences of women panchayat members from the panchayats of Jammu District in Jammu and Kashmir and Shimla District in Himachal Pradesh. For this purpose, the case studies of some effective women panchayat leaders have been carried out which other women can look up for inspiration.

Keywords: Panchayats, Participation, 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Reservation

Introduction

Panchayats have been in existence since long in the country. Women, however, have not been an integral part of this system before 73rd Constitutional Amendment was passed in 1993 to ensure 33 per cent reservation to women. Whatever local self-government existed before 73rd amendment had little effect on gender relations. In India, a handful of women, usually one in each village, were nominated as members of the panchayat. Yet, their participation remained nominal and most didn't even bother to attend the meetings but simply gave their thumbprint as signature to whatever decisions were taken. In the case of Jammu and Kashmir, institutions of rural governance too remained men's monopoly until it provides reservation to women in 2003.

Poor participation of women in political decision making has been identified as one of the root causes for the situation where majority of women still lag behind men in power, wealth and opportunity and hence the need for positive discrimination to ensure women their rightful place in political decision-making processes. The political institutions have to become more truly representative and accountable. The inclusion of women can lead to a redefinition of the form, content and practice of politics and bring to politics the perspective of the marginalized which should lead to a more need based human development (Buch 2010).



In India, the question of women's participation in decision-making process got the attention of the Committee for Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974. It was the status report by CSWI in India titled 'Towards Equality' (1974) which came as a shock to Indian women who realised that even after 27 years of independence, not only were they performing the traditional roles expected of them by men, but also had been characterised by illiteracy, poor health, marginalised employment, violence and had no role in the decision-making process in any spheres of life. The CSWI report recommended women's quota at the panchayat level (Singla 2007).

With only 11.8 per cent of representation of women in Lok Sabha and 11 per cent in Rajya Sabha, India ranks 148th in the world out of 191 countries, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2017 report, an international organization that works for promoting democracy in the world. India has only sixty-four women lawmakers in the current 542-member Lok Sabha, while there are twenty seven women MPs out of 245 members in Rajya Sabha at present. India's rank is 99 places below Nepal and fifty-eight places behind Pakistan. The scenario for women Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) across all State assemblies in India is even worse, with the national average being a pitiable 9 per cent.

The Panchayati Raj Act, 1992-popularly known as 73rd amendment-was enacted in the country to revitalize the Panchayati Raj institutions (PRI's) besides providing for reservation to women. Himachal Pradesh implemented 73rd Constitutional Amendment through Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 and reserved 33 per cent seats for women in PRIs. In 2008 Himachal Pradesh further amended its Panchayati Raj Act and increased the reservation for women to 50 per cent. The erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) introduced various Acts regarding rural local self-governing bodies, the most important being Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989. The provisions of 73rd amendment were not extended to the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) State owing provisions of Article 370. However, after the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, J&K has adopted the 73rd Constitutional Amendment now.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was a significant step towards opening up the space for women's political participation and in acknowledging their role in the development of their village. For the first time, in the history of this country, one million women were elected to various tiers of panchayats. Women who have been elected to power in the PRIs represent various backgrounds - rich and poor, dominant classes and oppressed social classes, educated and illiterate (PRIA, 2003).

Women have opened up the possibility for politics to have not only new faces but a new quality. But increasing the representation of women has not automatically led to a more gendered analysis of the issues confronting local government. Nor has it necessarily raised the profile of women's needs and interests in the policy agenda, given that elected women often act as proxies for men's views in the panchayats, being advised by their male relatives. But there is now a minority of women who are in politics because of their leadership qualities or feminist consciousness and visible changes in the articulation of ideas and leadership qualities exhibited by this minority has been noted in the different priorities and different values espoused by women in politics (Jain 1996).

Studies have shown that while such reservation is a necessary condition for engendering governance, it is by no means sufficient to ensure their participation in political processes. Women are prevented from making effective use of the political spaces provided by the Constitutional Amendment for a variety of



reasons that include the existence of vested interest groups, lack of party support, the criminalization of politics, women's lack of mobility, education and resource (Nanivadekar 1998).

The present paper is an effort to analyse the experiences of women panchayat leaders from the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh who are elected in recently conducted panchayat elections in respective UT/state. Panchayat elections in J&K are recently conducted in 2018 whereas the Himachal Pradesh conducted panchayat elections in 2015. For the purpose of study, the women panchayat members who were elected in Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh are selected for the study as both share same topography and also because Himachal Pradesh has vibrant PRIs in comparison to Jammu and Kashmir where PRIs are still thriving. Jammu and Kashmir has not implemented 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act fully until recently and thus women did not get adequate opportunity to occupy leadership positions in villages whereas in Himachal Pradesh about 58 per cent women are now elected in panchayats.

Women Leaders' Experience in Panchayats

Women panchayat members' experiences in the panchayats, the successes and disappointments as well as the forces which worked for or against them, are best seen in their in-depth case studies. The experiences narrated in these case studies reflect a variety of changes taking place among women. There are variations due to multiple factors like socio-cultural contexts, education, economic status, family set-up, political background of the family, etc.

The present research paper captures the experiences of women panchayat members from J&K and Himachal Pradesh in the form of case studies. These case studies are of women with diverse background who belong to different castes, groups and communities. The case studies of women panchayat members present case of effective women leadership at the grassroots level, which other women can look up to. Most of the case studies reflected co-operation and encouragement from their families, contributing to the success of these women. Their achievements or failures in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are mostly at par with their male counterparts and in some cases, they are better and more sensitive to the women's needs.

Case Study 1

Usha Rani: Usha Rani, age 52, is a panchayat member of Jhinderpanchayat of Mira Sahib Block, Jammu. She has been elected as a panchayat member for the very first time in 2018. She is educated up to 8th class only and is living in a joint family. She has two sons and one of them is pursuing the Ph.D in economics from University of Jammu. She is economically sound, as her husband was retired as Officer from the Department of Small-Scale Industry and other family members are also doing government jobs.

She was active in doing social welfare works for her village community even before being elected as panchayat member. Recognizing her contribution to social welfare, she was appointed as a member of PanchayatAdalat by the Panchayat and village community. She was averse to join any political party despite of the fact that many local people of different leanings tried to convince her. She asserts, "I am doing social work for the wellbeing of my people and I have no greed to achieve any status by joining political party. I am trying my best to help the needy villagers, as much as I could do".



She contested from the Scheduled Caste (SC) reserved seat that was won by her with overwhelming majority of votes. She said that that her community convinced her for the election and her family also fully supported her. She had no prior experience in politics but she has considerable awareness about the development schemes and funds allocated to the village welfare and development by the centre. She reported that she usually consults her son, who is pursuing Ph.D. in Economics, for getting clarity about various rural development schemes. She constructed *ShamshanGhat (Cremation Ground)*, irrigation channels and village streets in her panchayat ward with the help of funds allocated by Government. She mentioned that many farmers are getting financial support (Rs. 6,000/- each annually) under the Prime Minister KisanNidhiYojna (PMKNY) scheme with the active persuasion of her panchayat.

She has been connected with the Non-Government Organization (NGO) ‘KiranIshawar President Society’ that is working to create awareness among the panchayat members about the various schemes launched by the centre for the welfare of the rural people. This NGO also works for the welfare of the women of the villages. Mushroom Cultivation training was given to the village women for their welfare and empowerment.

In the recently conducted ‘Back to Village’ campaign run by the Union Territory (UT) Government, she actively presented the various problems and obstacles faced by panchayatmembers as well as rural people before the Government functionaries. She said, “Personally, I tried to help the old age people of my village to get pension timely and I got succeeded to provide them their rights”. On the other hand, she also contributed for making masks and distribution of those masks among the poor villagers, who could not afford to buy masks from market during the lockdown. She has also distributed food grains on her own, for the needy ones in her village during the pandemic. She has helped financially many poor families of her village for their children’s marriage.

Usha has helped the widow villagers to provide card under the Mahatma Gandhi Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). She narrates, “Though, it was quite difficult task for me as officially it was out of the rule. But I made consistent efforts to provide the widows the MGNREGS cards and my successful story was also highlighted on the various social media channels”.

She highlighted some problems regarding the releasing of funds to her ward by the sarpanch. She complained that the sarpanch’s are always been biased when the distribution of the funds comes. She said they never distribute the money equally among the punches; therefore, the government should distribute the funds among the various wards on their own.

Usha Rani is visionary leader. She is working on the plan for the development of her village. She wanted to construct a community hall for the gram sabha meetings. She is also thinking to provide the skill development training to the women of her village. She argues that this will help them to become financially independent. Thus, the experience of Usha Rani presents an excellent success story for her fellow colleagues.

Case Study 2

Soma Devi: Soma Devi, 34 years old, is a sarpanch of Gagiayan Panchayat of Bishnah Block, Jammu. She is educated up to 10th class. She has four children. Her husband was died in a road accident in 2018. She said her husband supported her for the panchayat election and he was very cooperative. She was a strong woman and has dedicated her life for the sake of her villagers.



She was elected for the first time on reserved seat for women and she did not have affiliation to any political party. She was motivated by community to contest elections. Neighbors helped her in election process like in filling nomination and campaigning. She was also not financially sound. She said, “Every political authority is now known to me and at every step I get their support regarding the village development affairs”. She had been working for the welfare of her panchayat since 2016 even before she formally elected as sarpanch. She said that she went to Mumbai for five days with her husband in 2017, through a government scheme, as she was selected as social activist working for the development of her village. She has been an inspiration for many people of her village.

She has helped many people to construct toilets under Swachh Bharat Mission and also working hard to maintain the sanitation channels. She appreciated the Block Development Officer (BDO) for her consistent support and provisioning of the funds for developing the basic infrastructure facilities. The sanitation facilities are appreciable and the street roads were well maintained and cleaned

People of her village have great expectations from her and they approach her with their problems like family conflicts, land disputes etc. She tries to solve people’s problems by discussing matters in panchayats and through negotiation. She emphasised that special efforts are made to solve the women related problems. She has also helped many women of her village to apply for home loans as well as getting ration cards and gas cylinder cards for the needy ones.

She wants to contest the next panchayat elections. She was of the view that women can participate actively without men’s support. She enjoys goodwill of her village people. She is a very inspirational woman who wants to contest for higher political positions. She regularly participates in the panchayat meetings and openly discusses the issues and problems with the other members.

Case Study 3

Sakshi Choudhary: Sakshi Choudhary is a sarpanch of a halqapanchayat from R.S Pura Block, Jammu. She was educated up to 12th class. She was elected as a Sarpanch for the very first time due to the support of her family. She was self-determined as well as motivated by her husband and community to contest election for sarpanch. Neighbours helped her in the election process like filing nomination papers, campaigning, etc.

She regularly conducts panchayat meetings and issues and problems are discussed openly by all the members. Decisions are taken with consensus as she tries to take all members into confidence. She regularly attends the training programmes for panchayat members organized by Block administration.

She was aware of all the major programs like MGNREGA, National Rural Livelihood Mission, Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen), and various pension schemes for widows, handicaps, old age, abnormal pension schemes, *LadliBeti* for girls and various agricultural schemes to help farmers. She has been able to provide job cards to many people under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). She is fully aware about the powers and responsibilities of panchayats. She considers development work, implementation of government policies, settling disputes, etc. as main responsibilities of the panchayat representative.

She conducts panchayat meetings twice a month and ensured that the meetings intimation as well as its agenda is provided to all the members prior to the meetings. She gave special attention to women’s



problems. People approach her with their problems like family conflicts, land disputes, village development, etc.

She has completed with the works like the renovation of *PanchayatGhar*, constructed three *ShamshanGhatt* and three ladies Bathroom in her village and also maintained drainage system. She said that the major problem as a sarpanch she is facing is the lack of support from the departments and conflict between the opposition parties which becomes the obstacle for the development works of the village. Still she is giving her best to make her village free from the lack of the basic infrastructure.

Case Study 4

NeelamKumari: NeelamKumari, 35 years old, is a panchayat member of MuralainPanchayat of Miran Sahib, Jammu. She has done Graduation and was working as a teacher in a private school before becoming a panchayat member. She is elected for the first time in 2018 on reserved seat. She was of the view that the female participation is very good in her panchayat and they are actively doing panchayat workwith their male counterparts.

She has been affiliated to BJP party though she had not held any post and had good links with legislators from the area. She has been taking interest in village affairs long before being elected as a sarpanch. People, particularly women, have expectations of performance from her and she is confident about fulfilling their expectations.

She has good knowledge about the various schemes for the farmers and rural people. She helped many farmers to apply for the Prime Minister Kisan SammanNidhi Yojna. She also helped many people of her village to apply for the gas cylinder and domicile certificates. She gave her effort for the construction of *ShamshanGhatt* and drainage system was also channelized. A medical camp in her area in 2019 was organized with the help of sarpanchand the medical team.

She has good political awareness about PRIs. She was aware of the three tiers of PRIs. She attends the panchayat meetings regularly and reported the prior intimation of agenda is doprovided to all the members. She favored reservation and argued that it is necessary for enabling women’s participation at local level and thus including them in decision making.

She is critical of current system of allocation of funds to panchayats. She believes that panchayats should get statutory money through proper mechanism. A committee should be appointed for the distribution of the funds among the panchs. Panchayat members should be provided incentives because of their poor economic conditions. The main issues discussed in panchayat meetings are related to development matters and basic facilities. She planned for the development of her panchayat like the maintenance of the streets and drainage system and to organize skill development workshop for the women of her village.

Case Study 5

Kamla Devi: Kamla Devi, aged 46, is a panchayat member of Baldeyanpanchayat under Mashobra Block of District Shimla. She has studied up to 8th class. She is a widow and her parents in law are also no more. She has two children and is living in a nuclear family. She has been elected from the OBC category. She was elected as a panchayat member for the first time in 2001. No one in her family has previous experience in panchayats and also none of them is in politics.



She is not economically sound. She is dependent on only the widow pension and a little honorarium as the panchayat member. She has to climb the hill and walk up to threekilometer in order to reach the panchayat office. She has been disseminating the information about welfare schemes to all households by visiting door to door. Despite of these adverse circumstances, she does not turn away from panchayat work and completes it with great gaiety.

The Pradhan of the panchayat is very much satisfied with her work. While working as panchayat member, not a single scheme remained pending in her ward. She completed her part of all schemes of the panchayat which is a record. She is not interested to join any political party as her sole focus is the well-being of her village people while remaining politically neutral. She is active in social welfare works. She has been attending various training programmes and regularly attends panchayat meetings and raises important issues independently. She attends Gram Sabha and Mahila Gram Sabha meetings regularly.

She informed that her panchayat income is quite adequate. She argues that government officers always support me in the implementation of the development programs and never found any favouritism in the identification of beneficiaries for development schemes. Conflict with livelihood demands and covering long distance to reach the place of panchayat meeting are the main problems faced by her. In addition, non-cooperation from the upper caste members is also one of the problems mentioned by her. However, she was satisfied with her male colleagues and argues that all work like team.

She said her community convinced her for the panchayat election and her family also supported her. She was motivated by her community to contest elections and they actively campaigned for her and also helped in the filing of nomination papers. She has been an inspiration for many people of her village. She understands the powers and responsibilities of the panchayat. She is well aware of the village development schemes, rural development programmes and funds available for village welfare and development schemes.

People of her village have many expectations from her and they approach her with their problems like family conflicts, land dispute and village development matters, etc. She tries to solve people's problems by discussing matters in panchayat meetings. She has helped many people of her village in the matters like birth, death, marriage certificate, ration cards, home loans, widows, handicapped, old age pensions and agricultural schemes. She secures job for many needy people under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). She says that if the honorarium of women panchayat members increases and more training programmes organized, the performance of the women panchayat members can be more satisfactory.

Case Study 6

Meera: Meera, aged 45, is a panchayat member of Dhallipanchayat under Mashobra Block of District Shimla. She has studied upto 8th class. She is married and living in a joint family. She is a Rajput lady belonging to the middle class family. She was elected for the first time from the General Category seat. She has been affiliated to BJP party but didn't occupy any post or position. She has been taking interest in village affairs long before being elected as a panchayat member.

She said her community convinced her for the panchayat election and her family also supported her. She has been connected with women Self-Help Group (SHG) namely 'Kashi'. She is a Pradhan of this



Self-Help Group. This group spreads awareness towards organic farming. This group markets their milk products which are quite popular in Himachal Pradesh and are often featured in newspapers. This makes women financially independent and self-employed.

She says, “We have been awarded ‘NirmalPuruskar’ in recognition of the brilliant work of our panchayat and our panchayat name is Nirmal Gram PanchayatDhali”. It was observed that she has dedicated her life for the sake of her villagers. Neighbours helped her greatly in the election process. She attended the training programme meant for panchayat members which increased her efficiency in panchayat works. She actively participates in every meeting conducted by panchayat and highlights the various problems of local people.

She has good knowledge of various schemes implemented for the welfare of village people. People approach her with their problems like land disputes, village development, family conflicts and pensions, etc. She try to solve their problems by discussing matters in panchayat meetings. She emphasized that specific efforts are made to solve women related problems. She also secures job cards for many needy people under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) and under Self-Help Group ‘Kashi’.

She said that her panchayat income is sufficient. There is no favoritism in the identification of beneficiaries for development scheme and also male colleague’s behavior is very cooperative. She said that if women get a safe environment, then they can do a great job. If the participation of women in PRI’s is to be increased, then incentives must be provided. She was of the view that the status of women has positively changed after being elected to panchayats. Thus, the case of Meera shows us how women can bring change in the life of local people, particularly women, through their active political participation.

Case Study 7

ShakuntlaDaud: ShakuntlaDaud, 50 years old, is a Pradhan of Nandpurpanchayat from Jubbal-Kotkhai Block of Shimla. She was educated up to Graduation. She is married and living in a nuclear family. She belongs to Rajput caste. She has been elected from the General Category seat. She has been affiliated to BJP party but none either family has experience of panchayat work or politics. She has been taking in interest in village affairs long before being elected as panchayatPradhan.

In panchayat meetings, she had raised several issues concerning village development, women welfare, schemes for Below Poverty Line (BPL) families and basic facilities like sanitation, water supply, health, pension etc. Several infrastructure facilities and amenities were created in the village at her initiative.

She reported that panchayat income is in adequate for carrying out substantial development activities in village and she wants more funding from government to improve the financial condition of panchayats. There is no favoritism in the identification of beneficiaries for developments scheme and also male colleague’s behavior is very cooperative.

She argued that her family and community convinced her to contest elections campaigned for her and also helped in the process of filing of nomination form. She understands the powers and responsibilities



of the panchayat. She is well aware of the village development schemes, rural development programmes and funds available for village welfare and development schemes.

She also mentioned that people of her village have many expectations from her and they approach her with their problems like family conflicts, land dispute and village development matters etc. She tries to solve people's problems and she has helped many people of her village in the matters like water supply, health, old age and widow pensions, ration cards, home loans, etc.

Shakuntala Daud tells that she has been the Pradhan of Nandpur Panchayat thrice. She asserted that the reason for her back-to-back victory is the kind of works she has completed in her panchayat like many roads constructed in the village, *Panchayat Ghar* was constructed, most of the street lights were installed in the village and she also argued that whatever kind of help people needed, she gave her best efforts. Her panchayat has been awarded the 'Nirmal Gram Puruskar' in the year 2011 by Honorable President of India for the excellent work of the panchayat.

She mentioned the number of appreciable works completed during the lockdown like the village people were made aware of the Corona pandemic by the panchayat members, sanitization work was done from time to time in the village and they also contributed for making masks and distribution of those masks among the villagers who could not afford to buy masks from market. She always encourages the women panchayat members to express their views and offer suggestions freely during panchayat meetings. When enquired about her performance from local people, they termed her as a successful Pradhan and argue that if she decides to contest next elections, they would definitely elect her again.

Case Study 8

Raveena: Raveena, aged 25, is a panchayat member of Kuipanchayat under Rohru Block of District Shimla. She has studied upto 12th class. She is married and living in a joint family. She belongs to Scheduled Caste category and was elected for the first time from the reserved seat. She has been taking interest in village affairs long before being elected as panchayat member and also taking part in different type of activities held at Panchayat and Block level.

She said her community convinced her for the panchayat election and her family also supported her. She has been connected with the Mahila Mandal. She is an active member of Mahila Mandal. This group spreads awareness towards different programs related with women development and also every month Mahila Mandal organize sanitation work at village level. This group also celebrates the prominent local, national and international days with the active participation. This makes women aware and active in different fields.

She reported that in recognition of the good work of her panchayat and active participation of their Mahila Mandal, they have been awarded "Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Mahila Sashktikaran Puruskar". She is an inspiration to many local women. She has been attending panchayat meetings and asserting the various issues of her ward with full conviction. She was of the view that the women can bring change in their socio-economic status through availing the opportunities in political arena.

Raveena is very aspirational lady. She wanted to contest for higher positions. The local people of her panchayat were very appreciative of her efforts. She was well aware of various government programs for the welfare of rural people. She has been regularly presenting the issues of people before



government functionaries. She presents to us a success story where aspirations are cast that women are only namesake members and their husbands are handling the affairs on behalf of them.

In conclusion, it can be said that the local influence of the families of elected women was instrumental in assuring their win in most of the cases. There is a significant change in their attitude after gaining experience in panchayat bodies. In contrary to popular perception, there were some exceptional women panchayat members who refute the popular perception that women are not meant for public role. They showed with their performance that women can perform better than men in public life. Further, the family background of a woman may help her in getting a political post but until they work independently, they can't gain the legitimacy in the eyes of people. The case studies of these women panchayat members highlight the fact that they were getting inspiration from their experiences in the local bodies and most of them were willing to continue in politics to serve public which is a positive development.

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