

Women empowerment through PRIs: Liberation from poverty and suppression

^[1]Dr. Pobon Kr. Gogoi

Associate Prof. Gargaon College

Email. pobongogoi@gmail.com

Abstract: The Panchayatiraj Institutions (PRIs) are the instrument through which women's empowerment can be ensured. The PRIs are the grassroots administrative mechanism intended for the development of rural areas and their people. The people include both men and women. But whatever the arrangement prevalent in India creates more opportunities for women counterparts living in rural areas. Since the last 75 years of independence, the legislative obligations have initiated different women-friendly processes which assured the enhancement of women's empowerment. Different women-related schemes as well as laws were framed and passed to endorse women's empowerment. Further, women's empowerment is relatively interconnected with the development of the nation. Being an agrarian country, India needs help from almost half of its population to increase agro-based products. It is assumed that if women are empowered then the GDP will increase more. In regards to participation in socio-economic and political fields, it is expected that women will more vibrantly participate in the process and a modern society will be established. Considering all the above elements in mind, the researcher endeavours to analyze the PRIs which will provide opportunities to enhance the empowerment of women. The critical observations, pros and cons, limitations of PRIs, and prospects are the primary concerns of this paper. There are different research studies, journal articles, and books that deal with this subject but nobody has analyzed from liberation of women from a poverty and suppression point of view. It will provoke the upcoming researcher to justify the arguments empirically in different states and places of India.

Keywords: Panchayatiraj, Women Empowerment, Legal Provisions, Poverty Eradication.

1. Introduction:

The Panchayatiraj institution (PRI) is instrumental in the decentralization of powers by allowing the rural people in India to actively participate in the political and decision-making process of the government. Democracy must be strengthened at the grassroots level so that the actual role of the people is ensured in state functions without any gender discrimination. The Panchayatiraj system has been the route for rural women to walk through from the kitchen to the public. The constitutional recognition of the Panchayatiraj by the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 coupled with affirmative action towards 33% reservation (in Assam 50%) of seats is an epoch-making event in the history of the development of democracy in India. Women empowerment which is a global phenomenon, of course, direly necessitates at the village level whereas many surveys, field studies, and observations made by government, NGOs, and research scholars find that rural women are economically poor, socially backward, and politically ignorant culminated in victimization of atrocities, violence and superstitions more notably like Witchcraft. The Prime Minister's policy of saturation and organizing "*Mann Ki Baat*" with the disadvantaged groups accentuates more inclusive growth which includes women empowerment. In this regard Panchayatiraj system plays a pivotal role in changing the status of women in society and the degree of political participation is recorded as much higher than in MLA and MP elections. So, the role of Panchayatiraj institutions in rural women empowerment is a matter of analytical discussion to evaluate the present scenario and give it the right direction for the upliftment of the fair sex.

India is a rural country consisting of 64 percent of people living in rural areas. (World Bank estimates, 2022) and out of which 48.69 percent are women (rural) as per the 2011 census report. To cover up these large numbers of people living in rural areas and almost half of the women, India constituted 2.69 lakhs Gram Panchayat as an integral part of PRIs. If it is estimated that 33% of seat reservations for women in Gram Panchayats (GPs) then almost 81.5 lakh women got the opportunity to get elected as a member of GPs and participate in the decision-making process. The figure would be extended if we include the upper level of Panchayats like Panchayat Samiti (Block level Panchayat) and Zila Parishad (District Panchayat). Getting the opportunity to be directly involved in the PRI decision-making process might open the prospect of raising the

issues related to women. The concerning issues may be categorized into awareness generation, economic upliftment, public opinion generation against anti-women activities, preservation of rights and liberties, the realization of their problems, political participation, a platform to protest against any exploitation, etc.

Thus, this study is an attempt to examine the role of rural women in PRIs and give an outlook on women's empowerment. To understand this following objectives have been undertaken.

2. Objective of the study:

1. To deal with the historical overview of the position of women in pre and post-independence periods of India.
2. To evaluate the implication of PRIs in rural women empowerment.
3. To critically analyze whether the participation of women in PRIs makes them empowered.
4. To suggest some measures to make the Panchayatiraj system more supportive for rural women.

3. Methodology:

The study on Women empowerment through PRI's: Liberation from Poverty and Suppression is an academic endeavour perpetuating the concept, forms, and implications. The analytical method is used to justify the arguments on the subject and secondary data sources are applied to exemplify the facts and figures. The scope of the study is delimited within India and secondary sources of data like printed books, journals, edited volumes, and internet sources are applied.

A historical overview of the position of women:

From time immemorial women had to be dependent on their male counterparts in every state of human history. The probable reason for that might have been the physical strength for which they were to be protected by their kith and kin in the presence of the organic truth 'survival of the fittest'. Hindu mythology, as well as Greek mythology, witness the existence of several goddesses but as human beings, women had to be dependent and enjoyed less freedom than men except for the women of royal families like queens, princesses, etc. according to the governing rules of the Hindu social tradition both Mitakshara and Dayabhaga, a girl shall be maintained by her father until marriage, after marriage she will be maintained by husband if become widow then by the family of her husband and at the old age by her son. Here one point is to be remembered that in no case widow marriage was permitted in Hindu society. Manu and Manusmriti lay down that the aged parents, the chaste wife, and an infant child must be maintained even by doing hundreds of misdeeds. The contemporary Muslim society was also not exceptional. Many provisions are there in the great holy Quran and injunctions of Sunnat which give us room to assimilate the dependent position of women. In Muslim society, polygamy of up to four wives was permitted and polyandry was not permitted. A divorced Muslim woman must be maintained by her former husband up to the Iddat period and in this regard we can refer to Sura II, Ayat 421 of the holy Quran as "for the divorced women let there be a provision of kindness, this is an obligation or those who are mindful of God."

In the middle Ages due to the misinterpretation of the religious text, the position of women worsened to an unprecedented extent. Their rights and freedom were denied. Buying and selling of women in the open market, the Devadasi system, the practice of Sati, compulsory wearing of Burkha are the instances that medieval history reveals. When the British came to India and established colonial rule along with the Western education system (in fact this was for their interest) brought about the Renaissance of modern India. The first effort was made by the abolition of Sati in 1829 with the magnificent contributions of Raja Rammohan Roy and Lord William Bentinck. The subsequent initiatives were taken by prominent social reformers like Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, Govind Ranade, and so on who advocated widow marriage, women's right to property, reformation of the Hindu Law of Inheritance, severe punishment for female infanticide, etc. the introduction of women education marked a new era in the path of women empowerment in India. Due to the impact of globalization educated women with the support of some male feminists raised their voices against the prevalent male-dominated society. They demand equal rights and freedom coupled with justice which is the basic foundation of modern democracy. Modernization in the process of reconstruction of society is going on but noticeable fact remains where only the educated women especially in the urban areas are being influenced and the rural women are lagging far behind.

Implications of PRIs for women empowerment:

The Panchayatiraj system is one kind of local self-government that was introduced in India at the time of British rule exactly when Lord Ripon was the Viceroy. Such types of institutions are also the brainchild of Mahatma Gandhi as we know that the Directive Principles of State Policy pertaining to Panchayat is known as the Gandhian principle which invokes wide-ranging welfare of the society. By the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, of 1992 the Panchayatiraj system has been granted constitutional recognition and seats are reserved for women on a rotation basis.

One may trace the empowerment of women through PRIs in a variety of ways. It is crucial to offer training and capacity-building initiatives to female elected officials. With the help of these programs, they can improve their knowledge and abilities and take an active role in decision-making. India is one of the several nations that have implemented reservations for women in PRIs. This ensures women's participation in local governance by designating a specific percentage of Panchayat seats for them. The number of women at these institutions has considerably increased. Further, at the local level, female elected officials can promote gender equality and women's rights by increasing knowledge of gender-related issues. They might take on the role of community change agents. In order to effectively advocate for and execute gender-responsive policies and programs that cater to the particular needs of women and girls in their communities, women in PRIs can play a critical role.

In addition, local finances and resources are generally managed by PRIs. It is imperative to guarantee that women possess authority over these resources and are able to distribute funding for initiatives that assist underrepresented groups and women. Gender budgeting concerns are among the things that need to be addressed. Women's representatives can receive invaluable assistance and resources for their efforts by networking with NGOs and women's organizations and working together. Women's representatives can receive invaluable assistance and resources for their efforts by networking with NGOs and women's organizations and working together. Women in PRIs have the opportunity to interact with their communities to learn about their needs and concerns - particularly those of women - and then integrate these into the agenda for local development.

It is critical to make sure that women have access to data and information about local development and governance initiatives. Measures of transparency and technology utilization can help accomplish this. Women can be further empowered by establishing systems to track and assess the results of their involvement in PRIs, which can serve as proof of their contributions to society. Women have the chance to participate in politics at the local level through PRIs. They are eligible to run for office and be elected to represent them at different PRI levels, ranging from the village to the district. Decisions about local governance, including resource management, development initiatives, and budget allocation, can be influenced and made by women elected to PRIs. They can now be heard on issues that directly impact their communities.

Women in PRIs can concentrate on topics including healthcare, education, sanitation, and gender-specific issues that are important to them and their communities. This aids in resolving issues unique to women and raises rural residents' standard of living in general. Women leaders in PRIs encourage other women and girls to aspire to leadership roles and make contributions to their communities by acting as role models. PRIs can also be used to track and assess how policies and programs affect women's well-being, which helps to make sure that government activities take gender equality into account. PRIs can also be used to track and assess how policies and programs affect women's well-being, which helps to make sure that government activities take gender equality into account.

The social position of women has been enriched by the Panchayatiraj system. Panchayat election has a direct impact upon the society as party ideology is a secondary factor here. The rural women get influenced and vice versa in three ways- contesting the election, being involved in the election campaign, and casting a vote as a voter

During elections, the political leaders put more emphasis on women. Since reservation of seats has been made, most of the women without any early political experience contest in the election either request from the local people or family members. It is observed that not only the women candidate but also the women accompanying the candidate learn a lot about politics, administration, speech delivery in public, and so on. Moreover, by representing a ward woman get the opportunity to contribute to social service, nation-building and

economic development, and environment protection. A walk from the dining table service to social service has led rural women to assimilate the value of women's empowerment. They become well aware of their snatched rights, those dilapidated freedom and trapped in dark gender justice.

The economic condition of the rural women is also developed by the Panchayatiraj system. Financial assistance provided by the government to instill the small and cottage industry particularly owned by women is also given through the PRIs. PRIs also distributed different assistance for self-help of women. Besides Panchayatiraj institution has been a platform for the rural women to discuss their grievances in the meetings of Gram Sabha. Since PRIs are directly related to the people it can convey the message to the government to include such welfare measures as needed while formulating public policy.

Critical Appraisal of the Women's Participation in PRIs:

Although the Panchayatiraj system has given a wider scope for women to participate in the political and decision-making process of the government the critical analysis and evaluation of the present scenario portrayed that the progress is at a snail pace.

In a Panchayat system, only those rural women generally file their nominations who are economically sound of it she is from good family backgrounds. Contesting in the election is an expensive matter and everyone cannot afford and that's why poor women do not dare to play the major role. So bulk of the population was left untouched by the Panchayat election.

Illiteracy impedes rural women's empowerment. It is not easy to grasp the technical jargon of politics and administration. Rural women have to face many difficulties for which they hesitate to get into these complexities.

It is also found that the political leaders most often use the rural women for their political end. The constitution has provided reservation of seats for women in Panchayat elections but those deprived political leaders try to retain the power using their wives or other female relatives as a device to dig the soil. In that situation, a woman has to act like a remote-controlled machine.

It is also seen that the bulk of women suffer from an inferiority complex. It may not be true in its entirety but true for rural Indian women.

Due to some administrative corruption, rural women do not get what has been provided by the government through Panchayatiraj institutions. Many allegations have been made so far women workers are paid less than male workers for the same work under MGNREGS. Here it is worth mentioning that the provision of equal pay for equal work has been inserted in our constitution under article 39 (d).

Suggestive measures should be considered: In order to improve women's empowerment following suggestions may be considered-

1. Free and compulsory education should be popularized so that rural women could be educated.
2. An awareness camp should be held to create awareness among women towards health-related problems.
3. Seminars on women's empowerment, gender discrimination, and observation of Women's Day may also give an impetus towards women's empowerment.
4. The government should encourage handicrafts, handloom, and small and cottage industries, especially involving women which on the other side can contribute to the growth of the village economy.
5. An environment should be created where rural women can freely engage themselves in economic activities for their earnings. Self-help is vital for women's empowerment.
6. Under Panchayatiraj institutions a bank can be established exclusively for women. These women's Panchayat banks should be less complex and the passbook and other documents should be in their mother tongue language.
7. As such state election commission is established to conduct the Panchayat elections likewise Panchayat level political parties should be created independent of national and regional political parties where rural women can in the real sense of the term participate in the political and decision-making process of the government.

8. Entry no 5 in the state list of the seventh schedule of the constitution of India, i.e. 'Local Government' should be shifted to the concurrent list so that the policy formulation at the state as well as national level can be influenced by the voice of the rural people.

4. Conclusion:

Rural women are pioneers for social, economic, political, and environmental transformation for the 'New India'. Agriculture employs more than 80 percent of rural women in India. To ensure the paradigm shift towards economic growth particularly in agriculture the rural women workforce should be empowered and streamlined. Significantly, the workforce participation rate for rural females is higher at 41.8 percent than urban women's participation rate of 35.31 percent (MoSPI, 2017). It will also help to enhance food and nutrition security and alleviate poverty and hunger. It's a win-win strategy for achieving Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

India is celebrating 75 years of India's independence with 'Azaadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' and transmitting the mission of affirming women as 'Empowered women- Empowered Nation'. So, women's empowerment is considered more important to ensure the growth of the nation.

In India, reforms are initiated for the holistic development of women and enabling socio-economic and health security. Since Independence, numerous government flagship schemes and programs have been initiated to improve the status of rural women in society by creating livelihood opportunities and engagements in paid employment. Various schemes, such as the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Program (PMEGP), National Livelihoods Mission, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), etc. have made significant contributions in creating gender parity and socio-economic empowerment of women in India. Now, rural women have access to education, productive resources, capacity building, skill development, healthcare facilities, and diversified livelihood opportunities through government beneficiary schemes.

Finally, it can be concluded that the PRIs are playing a very vital role in rural women's empowerment and it should be directed on the right track. PRIs are the platform for rural women to ensure their political rights and actively participate in the political decision-making process of the government. The socio-economic position of the rural women has been uplifted by this PRI system. Through the empowerment of women systematically, grassroots-level democracy will be enlightened in the future and women will be the torchbearer for the inclusive development of our nation.

References:

- [1] Yojana, June 2012, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India.
- [2] Handique, K.J. (ed) (2012). Rural Development in North-eastern Region Gargaon College Publication Cell.
- [3] Ardel. M. (2002). Women and Indian Society. Rawat Publication, Jaipur.
- [4] Mishra, S. (2002). Status of Indian women. Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi.
- [5] Patel, V. (2002). Women's challenges of the New Millennium. Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi.
- [6] Rahman, Z. (2005). Women and Society. Kalpag Publishing Delhi.
- [7] Desai, N. & Thakkar, U. (2001). Women in Indian Society. National Book Trust, Delhi.
- [8] Devi, M. (2016). Violation of Women's Human Rights in Assam.
- [9] Dutta, N. (2015). Communities of Women in Assam. Routledge.
- [10] Choudhury, S. (2016). Women and Conflict in India. Routledge.
- [11] Charrad, M. (2001). States and Women's Rights. University of California Press.
- [12] Borah, P. (2015). Political participation of women in NE India with special reference to Assam since independence, in International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Science, Society and Culture, vol-1, issue-1.
- [13] Narzary, M. (2013). Women's Marginal role in Politics with special reference to Assam, in Global Research Methodology Journal, vol-2, Issue-8.

- [14] Choudhury, S. (2012). Political Participation and Representation of women in Indian Politics, in International Journal of Behavioural Social and Movement Science, vol-1, issue-4.
- [15] Altekar, A. S. (1962). The position of women in Hindu civilization, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.
- [16] Forbes, Geraldin (1998), Women in modern India, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi.
- [17] Gupta, Kamala and Yesudian, P. Princy, (2006). Evidence of Women's Empowerment in India: A study of socio-spatial disparities, Geo Journal.
- [18] Jayal, Niraja Gopal, (2000). Gender and Decentralization, background paper commissioned by UNDP for the preparation of the discussion paper series 1, New Delhi.