

Status of Women Sarpanches in Village Panchayats – A Case Study

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Abstract

Viksit Bharat can be achieved only through the effective functioning of the Panchayati Raj **system**, as villages form the backbone of Indian society. Panchayati Raj Institutions play a crucial role in strengthening grassroots democracy by ensuring people's participation in governance and decision-making. Through decentralization of powers under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, Panchayats plan and implement development programmes based on local needs, thereby promoting inclusive and balanced growth. They are instrumental in executing rural development schemes related to employment, housing, sanitation, education, health, and infrastructure. Reservation for women and marginalized sections in Panchayats enhances social justice and empowerment, which are essential for sustainable development. Digital initiatives and transparent governance at the village level further improve efficiency and accountability. Thus, a strong and empowered Panchayati Raj system is fundamental to realizing the goal of **Viksit Bharat**, as national development begins with developed villages.

1. Introduction

The establishment of local governments is a key element of democracy, as it provides the platform for citizens to be involved in the planning, execution and monitoring of public service delivery. Local governments are considered a nursery for future leadership and provide them with practical experience to participate in governance. It is, therefore, important that all sectors of society are represented in local governments.

A Village Panchayat is not only cornerstone of Local Government Organization in India but also base level governance at the village or small town in the Panchayat Raj Institutions or PRI; governed by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

A Sarpanch is the Chairperson of an elected council at village and he or she chairs the council. The Meaning of Sarpanch is *Sar* means head and *Panch* means five, gives the meaning head of the five decision makers of the gram panchayat of the village. He is elected by all the people of the village for the period of five years. Most of the sarpanches are men, but some are women and they are called sarpanchni.

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2. Importance of the study:

The revolutionary nature of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act -1992, in response to civil society advocacy, reserved 50 percent of the seats in all tiers of local government for women. The performance of these women in the local councils also disproved apprehensions about women's ability to participate in governance and produce results for their constituencies. Their success was also evidenced by the tremendous acceptance and pride exhibited by their families and neighbors and the acknowledgement of their constituencies. Their involvement and advocacy also led to the passage of several pieces of pro-women legislation and policies by the federal and provincial government. Many of these women also became active community workers and advocates.

However, women also continue to face with many obstacles. Several studies document women's lack of effective participation at council meetings. Often, the husbands lead discussion on behalf of their wives. In other instances, women are seen preparing tea for the male members of the council and standing only in the background. Furthermore, studies also indicate that a number of women elected in the local bodies' elections were introduced as "Proxies" of male politicians. Such women got elected because they were close relatives of male politicians. Such evidence suggests that women continue to be seen through traditional patriarchal roles of being wives and mothers, not as effective decision makers in the public sphere. A number of factors continue to constrain women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions in general and Gram Panchayati in particular. Several non-conference motions have been brought against women leaders to remove them from their positions in the village panchayats. There are also examples of physical violence to keep women from speaking up in the meetings of Gram Panchayats

In view of the above constraints, which usually the women face and which inhibit their participation in Panchayat Raj Institutions needs further investigations and research. The findings of the study would undoubtedly help the policy makers in developing the policies, strategies for successful democracy.

3. Objective of the Present Study:

The main objective of the present paper is broadly to know the problems, perceptions, experiences and level of participation of elected women Sarpanches in Grama Panchayats in Warangal district of the Telangana State.

- Under this part, the study also tries to specifically study the socio- economic and political profile of elected women sarpanches in Grama Panchayats.
- To understand the present level of participation and functioning of women sarpanches in various decision making and developmental activities.
- To assess the level of awareness of elected women sarpanches on their rights and responsibilities.
- To know the main hindrances that pin down the women taking the decisions independently, participating effectively in the developmental activities.
- Finally, to find out the factors that facilitates and restrains the entry and participation of women in political field

4. Methodology:

The present paper is based on both primary and secondary data. The secondary data is collected from the existing literature. To collect the primary data, a formal and structured questionnaire is developed and administered on the four sarpanches one from each community i.e., one from the Scheduled Tribes, one from the Scheduled Caste, one from

the Backward Class and one from the Other Community are selected among the elected women sarpanches of Grama panchayats in Warangal District of Telangana state. Thus, the collected data is analyzed and presented in the form of paper. The results and conclusions drawn from the study are generalized.

5. Socio- economic and political Status of Women Sarpanches:

Four Sarpanches one from each community i.e., one from the Scheduled Tribes, one from the Scheduled Caste, one from the Backward Class and one from the Other Community are selected among the elected women sarpanches of Grama panchayats in Warangal District of Telangana state for the purpose of the present study. A formal and structured questionnaire is developed and administrated on the selected respondents to collect their profile, opinions, experiences and perceptions. Thus, the collected data is analyzed and outcomes are presented hereunder:

The analysis of the data of the respondents reveals that all the women sarpanches are young and they are in between the age group of 25 to 45. The data also indicates that all the women sarpanches are educated as they have completed their SSC, Inter and Degrees respectively. All women sarpanches are married, having children and half of them are living with joint families and remaining half are in single family. Further, the data reveals that all the women sarpanches are from the below middle-class families and having their own houses. Their annual income is in between one lakh to three and half lakh rupees. The analysis of the data reveals that all the women sarpanches are elected for the first time and new to the politics. They do not have earlier political experience and not belong to political families. The data reveals that all the women sarpanches are elected from the seats reserved for women only.

6. Cooperation from the officials and non-officials:

When the sarpanches are asked to give their opinion on the cooperation extended by the officials and non-officials, all the respondents expressed their satisfaction over the cooperation extended by the officials and non-officials of the state and local governments. The sarpanches opined that ‘sometimes they have to face noncooperation and problems from the political leaders of the opposition parties’.

Support from the family members:

When the women sarpanches are asked to give their opinion on the support extended by their family members, all most all the respondents expressed their satisfaction over the support and cooperation extended by their family members in general and husbands in particular. Further they expressed that “they are unable to spend their time with the family members and balancing the time in-between family and job has become great problem”.

Opinion on Reservations of seats to women:

When the women sarpanches are asked to give their opinion on the reservations of seats to women, all the respondents expressed their happiness over the reservation of seats to women candidates on the basis of community. Further, they said that they are elected because of the reservation of seats to women and this policy should be continued and also extended to the legislatures of Centre and state.

Opinion on present political system:

All the respondents expressed their unhappy over the present political system. Further they opined that money is playing key role not only local elections but also in all kinds of elections. Politicians as well as people are habituated to play money politics. The people should come forward and change the present political system.

Opinion on experience as Sarpanch:

When the respondents are asked to give their opinions, experiences and problems being faced by them with the stakeholders while discharging their responsibilities and dealing the things, they expressed their utmost happiness and greatest satisfaction over the position and post being enjoyed by them. However, the following genuine problems and practical experiences while discharging the duties and responsibilities are explained by them.

1. Some people criticize and talk negatively in front of public.
2. Sometimes officials and non-officials do not listen to our words.
3. Sometimes delay happens in payment of amounts to the works
4. Some people do not attend to the meetings of Grama Sabha
5. Spending money and buying votes in elections is pain giving one.
6. Some people treat the sarpanches as if they are their servants.
7. Everyday dealing with the settlements of family disputes is headache.
8. Not finding time to concentrate on children education and their problems.
9. Women extend full support to the women sarpanches than men.
10. The interference of village elders in village problems is unavoidable.

7. Suggestions to enhance the status of women Sarpanches:

When the sarpanches are asked to supply their suggestions to improve the status and working conditions of the sarpanches to make them more independent and actively participate in the developmental activities, the following suggestions are made by them:

1. First of all the elections should be free from spending of huge money.
2. The people should voluntarily come forward to take part not only in the meetings of Gram Sabha but also in all the developmental activities.
3. Change in the behavior and attitude of male candidates is still needed.
4. Reservations to women based on the community should be continued.
5. Funding from the governments should be enhanced and released regularly.
6. Training should be given to the elected women sarpanches.
7. The officials and non-officials should extend their cooperation to the women sarpanches.
8. The domination and interference of village elders should be checked.

9. The negative attitude of the society towards women sarpanches needs to be changed.
10. The behavior and attitude of the leaders of opposition parties should be changed.

7. Conclusions and Observations:

It is observed from the analysis of the information that the elected women sarpanches are youth, educated, married, from below middle class families and have the leadership qualities though they are new to the politics. The political reservations to women in local organizations made the women to take active participation in developmental activities of the villages. The performance of these women sarpanches in the village development also disproved apprehensions about women's ability to participate in governance and produce good and positive results for their villages. Their success is also evidenced by the tremendous acceptance and pride exhibited by their families and neighbors. All the young women sarpanches expressed their utmost happiness and greatest satisfaction over their role, status and performance. The study proved that the women sarpanches are no more "proxies" of male candidates.

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