

Impact of 73rd Amendment Act on Women's Leadership in the Punjab

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INTRODUCTION:

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has given a new dimension to the process of women's empowerment in India. Apart from one-third reservation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the act has given constitutional powers and responsibilities for a range of issues including resource management, family planning, education and health. With the participation of women in PRIs, interpersonal relations within their families have changed for the better and this political process has heightened women's perceptions of their own capabilities. Even much-marginalized women have taken participation further to become activists despite constraints like illiteracy, lack of experience, family responsibilities, restrictive social norms, lack of enabling environment and violence.

Studies have shown that the inhibitions around women's participation in public life are slowly diminishing and many of these women have begun to get autonomy with the gain of political experience. Singh (2004) found that in Haryana relatively younger women have begun to replace older ones. Reservation of women has led to formal empowerment of women in panchayats and the emergence of new women's leadership. These women have been able to participate considerably in deciding day-to-day activities.

Women in Karnataka have shown that they are capable of providing leadership to the people if they are given time, support, resources, training and freedom from men. (Hemalatha, 2003). The participation of women in PRIs in Andhra Pradesh has resulted in social identities and the development of political awareness. It has created an urge to become a part of mainstream political, economic and social life. In spite of many social and cultural

limitations, women have proved better leaders than their male counterparts. (Devi Prasad B. and Haranath S., 2004).

According to S. Narasimhan, women in the state have been able to do commendable work despite illiteracy and inexperience. They have started coming forward to participate in the Gram Sabha and have started raising their voices and making their perspective felt in decision making, leading to a more meaningful, equitable and democratic social matrix.

Chaturvedi (2004) observes that the representation of women in PRIs in Rajasthan has enabled them to participate in the democratic process of the country. The number of women participating at the level of Gram Sabha has increased. The active role of women in these institutions has led to a situation where they have become power sharers and consequently have become more confident and assertive.

Studies shows that prior to the Constitutional Amendment in West Bengal, women in the state, in general, did not seem keen to contest elections; however, after the reservation, there has been an increase in the number of women contesting in elections for each seat in the local bodies. The leadership of women is slowly being established in the state.

Sharma (2004) also observes that after the year 2000, with panchayat elections in Himachal Pradesh, there has been an increased participation of women in grass roots governance. The state government is also committed to reservations in the leadership structure of the community to give women their long overdue share of power so that they can exert pressure and

exercise authority in the decision making process.

In Kerala, according to Nair (1999), 34% seats were filled by women representatives in the District Council elections held in 1991-92. In the 1995 elections of PRIs, people elected more women than the reserved number. A favorable atmosphere has been created in this state where women have solved gender issues. The participatory planning movement in Kerala has created a favorable atmosphere for women representatives to create co-operative efforts and collective action.

Patil (1999) observes that the provision of 33% reservation to women in local government in Maharashtra has provided a new political role which involves them in the planning process in the state. In spite of many problems, these women are slowly becoming alert and assertive of their rights.

In general, elected women are fast making a place in panchayats all over India. The 73rd Amendment Act 1992 has certainly changed the situation of rural women and ensured their adequate representation at different levels of Panchayat Raj institutions. Women have shown remarkable maturity which has closely aligned them with the mainstream. The situation can become better over a period of time with men changing their mind set and accepting women in their new roles.

Objectives and Sampling:

Against the foregoing assumptions, the present study explores the impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 on women's leadership in PRIs in Punjab. The major objectives of the study are to explore the socio-economic profile of elected representatives, the extent of proxy participation and the reasons for contesting elections. In order to achieve the intended objectives, three village panchayats, namely, Chaura, Kalyan and Rakhra were selected from Patiala *tehsil*.

In these sampled panchayats, as per the 2004 panchayat election results, there were 22 representatives, out of whom 14 were male and 8 were female. Village-wise there were 6 representatives in Chaura panchayat, consisting of 2 women and 4 men whereas in Kalyan and Rakhra, the total strength was 8 each, out of whom 3 were female and 5 were male. Both Kalyan and Rakhra were headed by woman *sarpanches* while in Chaura, the *sarpanch* was a male.

For the purpose of the present study all women PRIs representatives (**N=8**) from the three selected panchayats were drawn for the sample. Likewise 2 women from village Chaura and 3 each from village Kalyan and Rakhra were selected.

FINDINGS:

Incidentally, all the women in the sample were married which points to the fact that unmarried girls and widows in rural areas are not given much priority as contestants in PRI elections. Marital status with a surviving husband remains a significant facilitating factor for women to enter into village politics.

Age-wise, all the women in the sampled panchayats were in the young age group ranging from 31 years to 45 years. This supports the observation that relatively young women have started replacing older ones. It may be mentioned here that there was women's representation even before the 73rd Amendment Act 1992 but these women were not elected but co-opted or nominated. The Balwant Rai Mehta committee for the first time in 1957 recommended the induction of two women in *panchayats* to carry out specific programmes for women and children. After that, women joined the PRIs as nominated members rather than elected ones.

Table 1.1 Age

S.No.	Age (in Years)	Age wise Distribution of Women Respondents across Sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	Below 30 years	-	-	-	-
2.	31-45 years	2 (100)	3 (100)	3 (100)	8 (100)
3	46-60 years	-	-	-	-
4	More than 60 years	-	-	-	-
	Total	2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

Figures in Brackets are percentages

In the sampled respondents (**Table 1.2**), there was no woman representative who belonged to the OBC category. It may be because the act provides for one-third reservation for women belonging to SCs and STs only, but there is no reservation for OBC women. The second reason could be that since the dominance of higher castes (land-owning castes) still prevails, by and large, in all villages in the Punjab and generally the number of higher castes is more in rural areas, (at least as far as these three sampled villages are concerned), the OBCs find it difficult to get nominated as candidates for contesting

elections and thereafter getting elected. It was further observed that the elected SC women also remain dependent on the higher castes in matters relating to their livelihood like cattle grazing, fodder and other such activities. Therefore it is important to acknowledge that the political empowerment of SC women and their independence can not be thoroughly delinked from their livelihood issues. For ensuring political independence, economic independence remains an important precondition of women's empowerment besides one-third reservation.

Table 1.2 Caste

S.No.	Castes	Caste wise Distribution of Women Respondents across Sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	General	1(50)	2(66.67)	1(33.33)	4(50)
2.	OBC	-	-	-	-
3	SC	1(50)	1(33.33)	2(66.67)	4(50)
	Total	2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

Figures in Brackets are percentages

According to Census 2001, female literacy in Chaura is 62.4% while male literacy is 74.3 with a gender gap of 11.9%. In Kalyan, the female literacy is 61.2% and male literacy rate is 78.8% with a gender gap of 17.5%. Similarly in Rakhra the female literacy is 75.3% while male literacy rate is 60.4 with a gender gap of 15%. In our sample, although the literacy rate was more than 62.5% formal education-wise, the situation was not very encouraging. Almost two-fifths (37.5%) of

women respondents were illiterate while an equal proportion, though literate, were not even 10th pass. Only one fourth (25%) respondents were formally educated beyond matriculation, out of which half were just 10th pass only. The woman who was a matriculate was from Chaura and her husband was a clerk in the Public Works Department. The woman who was B.A was from village Kalyan. Her husband was in the transport business. He also owned land.

Table 1.3 Education

S.No.	Education	Education wise Distribution of Women Respondents across Sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	Illiterates	-	2(66.67)	1(33.33)	3(37.5)
2.	Under Matriculation	1(50)	-	2(66.67)	3(37.5)
3	Matriculation	1(50)	-	-	1(12.5)
4	Graduate and above	-	1(33.33)	-	1(12.5)
Total		2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

Figures in Brackets are percentages

When Balwant Rai Mehta committee, in 1957, recommended the induction of two women in *panchayats*, generally the women from big extended families who belonged to the dominant castes, were nominated or co-opted as members but with the one-third reservation, women from small and less influential families have also started coming in through the process of elections. It is clear from the data that half the respondents in our sample were from families having five or

fewer members while the rest of them were from large extended families having more than six members. The larger families consisted of parents, husband's brothers and their wives and children but were not necessarily of the dominant caste groups. Though the large extended families are still influential in the entire political process, with the reservations, the influence of such families has started diminishing to a large extent.

Table 1.4 No. of members

S.No.	No. of Members	Distribution of Women Respondents across sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	<=5	2(100)	-	2(66.67)	4(50)
2.	6-10	-	2(66.67)	1(33.33)	3(37.5)
3	11-15	-	-	-	-
4	16 and above	-	1(33.33)	-	1(12.5)
Total		2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

Figures in Brackets are percentages

Half of the respondents earned their livelihood from daily work whereas the rest were from relatively better-off families. The husband of one woman, from Chaura, was a farmer who owned more than 45 acres of land. Incidentally he was also the *sarpanch* of the village. The husband of another woman, from Kalyan, was a businessman besides having agricultural land. The data reveals that the husbands of one fourth respondents (two women) were in government jobs, out of whom one was a clerk in the Public Works Department of the Government of Punjab.

The husbands of two respondents from village Rakhra worked as unskilled labourers in the Rakhra Sugar Mills while the husband of a third respondent was a mason.

From the data it can be said that half the women were from well to do families while the financial position of the other half was also not very bad. They too had a minimum satisfying standard of living. We see that the financial status of the family still remains one of the significant factors which facilitate women's entry into

village politics. But at the same time

women from poorer families are also visible on the political scene.

Table 1.5 Husband's occupation

S.No.	Occupation of Husband	Husband's occupation wise Distribution of Women Respondents across Sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	Labourer	-	1(33.33)	3(100)	4(50)
2.	Agriculture	1(50)	-	-	1(12.5)
3	Business	-	1(33.33)	-	1(12.5)
4	Govt. service	1(50)	1(33.33)	-	2(25)
Total		2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

Figures in Brackets are percentages

Table 1.6 Land ownership

S.No.	Land Ownership	Land ownership wise Distribution of Women Respondents across Sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	No Land	1(50)	1(33.33)	2(66.67)	4(50)
2.	Up to 02 acres	-	-	1(33.33)	1(12.5)
3	2-5 acres	-	1(33.33)	-	1(12.5)
4	More than 05 acres	1(50)	1(33.33)	-	2(25)
Total		2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

Figures in Brackets are percentages

On land ownership patterns, the families of half the respondents did not possess any land while families of one fourth women had up to five acres of land. There were about one-fourth women from well- to- do

families whose families owned more than five acres. One family had even more than 45 acres while yet another in Kalyan village had a transport business as well as agricultural land.

Table 1.7 Proxy Participation

S.No.	Proxy Participation (Yes/No)	Distribution of Women Respondents across Sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	Yes	2(100)	2(66.37)	2(66.67)	6(75)
2.	No	-	1(33.33)	1(33.33)	2(25)
Total		2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

The data (**Table 1.7**) depicts that in three fourth (75%) cases there was proxy participation by the husbands. The remaining one fourth (25%) who denied proxy participation were from Kalyan and Rakhra panchayats. It is worth mentioning that quite contrary to expectations, both these women were illiterate and belonged to the SC category. On the other hand, the respondent from Kalyan who was a graduate frankly accepted that her

husband participated in her place in the meetings.

From this analysis, it is clear that it is not always true that all the educated women assert their rights while the illiterate women allow proxy participation. In fact, the number of illiterate women asserting their rights and not allowing husbands to interfere in their day to day working has started increasing after 73rd Amendment

act while the number of educated women

allowing husbands to work as proxy has been decreasing significantly.

Table 1.8 Attendance in Gram Sabha Meetings

S.No.	Frequency	Distribution of Women Respondents across Sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	Always	1(50)	-	2(66.67)	3(37.5)
2.	Never	1(50)	-	1(33.33)	2(25)
3	Whenever gets time	-	3(100)	-	3(37.5)
Total		2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

Figures in Brackets are percentages

From the data it is clear that nearly two-fifths (37.5%) women are irregular in attending Gram Sabha meetings while one-fourth (25%) never attend these meetings. Interestingly one woman from Rakhra, who was regular in attending the meeting, said that although she attends meetings very regularly she does not participate in discussions. She simply signs the minutes after the meeting is over. From the data it can be said that although the 73rd Amendment act is still to

make a major qualitative difference in women's leadership roles, nevertheless, the legislation has proved significant in providing a place for women in village politics. Participation is the first stage of empowerment. In times to come, these women are likely to become active and gain the power to influence community decisions. So the one-third reservation under the 73rd Amendment act has indeed made a significant difference for women in rural areas.

Table 1.9 Reasons for Contesting Elections

S.No.	Reasons	Distribution of Women Respondents across Sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	Seat reserved for woman	2 (100)	-	1(33.33)	3(37.5)
2.	Desire of husband	-	2(66.67)	-	2(25)
3	Own Decision	-	1(33.33)	1(33.33)	2(25)
4	Any other	-	-	1(33.33)	1(12.5)
Total		2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

As is clear from the data (Table 1.9) 37.5% respondents contested the elections only because of the one-third reservation provided to them under the Act. Had there been no provisions for reservation, they would never have got such a chance. It is heartening to note that one-fourth women contested elections at their own wish. This is indicative of the

changing patterns of women's leadership in rural areas. One woman, however, was emphatic that she contested elections because a former MLA from her village asked her to do so, which means that the dominance of the higher caste and rich people has not been completely wiped out.

Table 1.10 Knowledge of the 73rd Amendment Act 1992

S.No.	Responses	Distribution of Women Respondents across	Total

		Sampled Villages			
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	Yes	-	1(33.33)	-	1(12.5)
2.	No	2(100)	2(66.37)	3(100)	7(87.5)
Total		2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

Figures in Brackets are percentages

Only one woman was aware of the 73rd Amendment Act 1992 but she could not tell what the act was meant for. She did not know that it provided one-third reservation to women in *panchayats*. Ironically, this woman was a graduate from Kalyan panchayat. The rest (87.5%) of them were absolutely ignorant about the Act. There is need for training and capacity building of elected representatives so that they are aware of the legislations and day to day working of these bodies. (**Table 1.10**)

With regard to household responsibilities, it was evident that the women elected in PRIs carry the double burden of family work as well as the official work of panchayats. Three-fourths (75%) women in our sample said that they have to do the usual kitchen work, take care of the

children as well as the cattle in the family besides going to the fields. There was absolutely no change in their daily activities after getting elected. The rest (one-fourth) lamented that their work has, in fact, increased, at least, as far as the work relating to the kitchen is concerned because the number of guests and other persons visiting the house has increased which eventually has increased their hospitality work like making tea or serving snacks to them. Both the *sarpanches* of Rakhra and Kalyan reported an increase in their kitchen work

This clearly reflects that daily life roles of the majority of the women elected to the PRIs remain unchanged. In some cases, the role has become far more burdensome as reported by one-fourth (25%) women in our sample.

Table 1.11 Changes in roles

S.No.	Changes in daily life roles	Distribution of Women Respondents across Sampled Villages			Total
		Chaura	Kalyan	Rakhra	
1.	In the kitchen work	-	1(33.33)	1(33.33)	2(25)
2.	In raring children	-	-	-	-
3	Raring cattle	-	-	-	-
4	Work in Field	-	-	-	-
5	No change	2(100)	2(66.67)	2(66.67)	6(75)
Total		2(100)	3(100)	3(100)	8(100)

CONCLUSION:

The findings of the study do not diminish the fact that women in panchayats continue to face major constraints in participating in local government institutions in terms of lack of experience, illiteracy, family responsibilities and lack of family support etc. However, the sheer numbers of women that have been brought into the political system by the one-third reservation under the 73rd Amendment Act have made a significant

difference, both qualitatively as well as quantitatively. And if constraints like lack of experience, family responsibilities, caste and gender dominance and lack of an enabling environment are overcome, most of them can show significant results towards emerging as leaders and improving their status and outlook at the grass root level. Thus there is a need to exhibit optimism and make further provisions for a facilitating and hassle free political environment.

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