

WOMEN AND PANCHAYATS

Panchayati Raj System of India is a unique and innovative example of grassroots democracy in world. It decentralises decision making and lets village communities decide their own needs and developmental priorities. Women, constituting almost half of village population, are an important stakeholder in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). However, the truth is that despite 33 per cent reservation, their genuine participation in Panchayats remains an unfulfilled goal. Mindful of this lacuna, Government has launched a nationwide programme to train women *sarpanch* to enable them take leadership positions in their villages. In following paragraphs, we'll discuss legal framework of Panchayati Raj in India and women's place in it.

Article 40 of the Constitution: It enshrines one of the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) and lays down that the State shall take steps to organise village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.

In pursuance to this PRIs were formed in a number of states but many shortcomings were observed in their functioning. Their elections were irregular and Panchayats were generally devoid of any real powers or developmental roles. So it was considered that there was an imperative need to enshrine in the Constitution certain basic and essential features of Panchayati Raj Institutions to impart certainty, continuity and strength to them. Thus, Constitution 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 came into existence.



Constitution 73rd Amendment and Panchayati Raj in India

The 73rd Amendment 1992 added a new Part IX to the constitution titled "The Panchayats" covering provisions from Article 243 to 243(O); and a new Eleventh Schedule covering 29 subjects within the functions of the Panchayats.

This amendment implements the article 40 of the DPSP. However, states have been given enough freedom to take their geographical, politico-administrative and others conditions into account while adopting the Panchayati Raj System.

Reservations for women

While the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution mandate that at least one third of the seats in the Panchayats must be reserved for women, at least five states have increased the proportion of reserved seats to 50 percent. Bihar was the first state to do so in 2006 and was followed by Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. All these states have raised their reservation quota to 50 per cent. Sikkim has raised it to 40 per cent.

Other Features of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act

- A three-tier Panchayat system. (states with populations upto 20 lakhs could dispense with the intermediate level and have a two-tier system).
- The Panchayat will enjoy a five-year term
- The *gram sabha* (village assembly) will consist of all persons registered on the electoral rolls.
- In the directly elected seats of members in all Panchayat, there will be reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), in proportion to their total population in a Panchayat area, and one-third of these seats will be reserved for women belonging to these groups.
- The Governor of the State will appoint a State Finance Commission to review the financial position of the Panchayat and make recommendations.

Need for capacity building of Elected Women Representatives (EWR)

There has been a growing realisation in the country that despite 33 per cent reservation for

women in the Panchayat bodies, the EWRs continue to remain ineffective since they do not have appropriate knowledge and skill to administer the village, and the show continues to be run by their husbands.

So a strong need was being felt for a programme to build capacities of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) and other women leaders.

Training programme for Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) of Panchayats

A comprehensive module for capacity building of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) of Panchayats and a training program for Trainers of women Panchayat leaders across the country was launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in collaboration with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj on 17th April, 2017. The training program seeks to empower EWRs of Panchayats by enhancing their capacity, capability and skill in governance and administration of villages.

Areas of training: These women representatives are being trained in order to ensure that they take up the responsibility of all the tasks entrusted upon them on being elected. The WCD Ministry has initiated this countrywide program of training the women *sarpanches* and other women representatives at the grassroots level in various areas like engineering (building of roads, drains, latrines etc.), finance, social development, education, health, and environment among others. The training will help the women *sarpanches* in taking the schemes launched for the benefit of the common man especially those in distress and the under privileged. These schemes include *Fasal Beema Yojana*, *Pradhanmantri Awas Yojana*, *Suraksha Bima Yojana*, *Sukanya Samridhi Yojana*, maternity benefits schemes among others. Apart from this, the training programme will help to raise these women to the next level of leadership.

It is pertinent to note that safety of women, education of the girl child, health of women, creation of assets under MGNREGA, immunization and ensuring nutrition through lakhs of *Anganwadis* of the country have become important issues at the grassroots level in which the women *sarpanches* can play a pivotal role in effective delivery. The women *sarpanches* are also being encouraged to form a whatsapp group and share their good practices as



well as assist one another in finding solutions to common problems.

Transparency: Under the 14th Finance Commission, the Panchayats will get Rs 2 Lakh crore in 5 years as against the earlier amount of Rs 30,000 crore for the overall development of the villages. Thus there is a need for greater accountability, honesty and transparency in the execution of the developmental projects like building of roads, drainage system, toilets, farm ponds and dwelling units. It is hoped that newly trained women representatives will be able to ensure this.

Starting with Jharkhand, the training programs will be organised in different states throughout the country with the help of National Institute of Rural Development, State Institutes of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Departments of the States to train EWRs throughout the county. There are currently around 13 lakhs EWRs in panchayats across the nation. Training women *sarpanches* across the country will help bring following important changes:

1. It will help to create model villages.
2. It will help prepare women as political leaders of the future.

The training module has been prepared by the National Commission for Women of the WCD Ministry in collaboration with Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). The training is participatory with group discussions, brainstorming lectures, demonstrations, field visits, case studies, games, exercise, role play, small workshops and individual assignments. The module discusses various topics like 'What is an ideal Panchayat', development schemes, resources of Panchayats and their utilisation, laws for protection of the vulnerable sections among others.