PANCHAYATI RAJ : OBSTACLES FACING BY WOMEN MEMBERS IN PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

Women face obstacles to their political participation in political institutions. Many factors and prevailing structures are considered as obstacles during the course of participation. The present paper is an attempt to identify some internal and external circumstances and factors that obstruct the creation of a supportive atmosphere for women's political participation in the local government institutions in Bihar through qualitative methods. The outcome of the present study indicates that the goal of women's empowerment through political participation will not be accomplished by affirmative actions alone. To further and speed up this process it is necessary to implement some additional strategies which can encourage the self-confidence of women and eliminate operating obstacles.

Key Words : Women empowerment, Gender Quota, Political participation, Bihar, Panchayati Raj, India

Introduction

Women's marginalization from political bodies and practices can be seen as a result of many operational, practical and personal factors across the world. As women are globally under-represented at all levels of governance in relation to their share of the population (IDEA 2006), a large number of countries have presented gender quotas system. Scholars have also justified the increased role of women in politics. (Phillips, 1993; Ross, 2002). Although the political participation is an equal democratic right for women but it does not mean that they have the same opportunities in entering and participation in the political field, as do men. For example, in a country like India where society is still highly patriarchal and most women are supposed to be dependent on their family, how gender quotas, as established by the Constitution of India at grassroots level after 73rd amendment in 1992, can empower women? This is a matter of concern because regarding the participation of women in the local government institutions of India many scholars have used the notion of "proxy women" (Omvedt, 2005; Chattopadhayay & Duflo, 2003) as an interpretation of elected women with only formal power. Then it can be argued that the presence of women is not necessary synonymous with their participation.

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There are many elements that obstruct women to participate fully in political institutions. Thus there is a need to attempt for a deeper understanding of the constraints of a society in which women's political participation is instituted. Thus the basic research question of the present paper is what kind of difficulties faced by women representatives, elected on the basis of gender quotas? The paper is structured as follows: in the first section the current state of knowledge is discussed. Section two discusses the gender and local governance in India followed by section 3 deals with the Bihar model of gender quota. In Section 4 Conceptual framework of the study is discussed. Section 5 discussed the research methodology and in section 6 data has been analysed. Section 7 shows the findings. The section 8 concludes by examining the findings and last section identifies areas for future research.

The current state of knowledge

Regarding the theories about the factors that detain the entry and participation of women in political field numerous studies have identified these obstacles. One of them is Shedova's (2005) study discusses about the masculine model of politics, a dual burden of domestic chores and professional obligations, lack of support from party and a lack of confidence and self-esteem. However according to Matland (1998) this research has not completely discussed about the way these obstacles can be valid in a background of low economic development. Matland maintains that one of the most important features of the society, connected with women's representation levels, is a country's state of development.

There are more studies that have made us aware about obstacles of the elected women in Indian PRIs, such as; opposition from family, discrimination in the panchayat meetings, influence of husband, unwillingness from parties, caste-based discrimination, lack of education and illiteracy amongst elected women (Baviskar 2003), dependence on support from males (Hust 2004), a risk for a high rate of drop out of elected women during their term 3 in office (Sivakumar & Maduresh 2006), and attitudes that women are not supposed to participate in the public sphere (Mahanta 2007). Other studies also explain about same issues. For instance, Bari's (2005) paper attempts to investigate bases of women's exclusion from the formal arena of politics. According to her structural and functional constraints faced by women are generally shaped by social and political relations in a particular society. She identifies five factors that hinder women in political participation and those are ideological factors, political factors, socio-cultural factors, economic factors and lack of social capital and political capacities. Similarly, Bano (2009) analyses the obstacles in the way of women's political participation which are reluctance of political parties, cultural values and lack of unity among women politicians.

Nevertheless, when researchers unfold the obstacles for elected women the picture is more diverse but still many factors seem to be absent. Thus there is a need for a more deep theoretical view on the obstacles for elected women in political institutions. The reservation itself cannot bring empowerment because women are constrained by a variety of social, cultural, economic, and political factors. In the existing research discourse, local governmental institutions in Bihar have not received much attention.

Gender and Local Governance in India : A Historical Background

Mahanta and Sinha (2007) describe that the word 'Panchayat' traditionally means a body of five elders in a village who were accountable to resolve the conflicts and to give punishment to the offenders. In this traditional conception of a 'Panchayat', women and lower castes were not allowed membership. Omvedt (2005) also explains the traditional working of panchayats (village level governmental intuitions) as caste communities which were controlled by men from the rural elite. In this social and political structure the system of self-governance known as Panchayati Raj was introduced in 1959 following the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee Report (1957) and it was further strengthen by the recommendation of Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) report. The Indian Government endeavoured to create a strong local government system but few women were elected to the panchayat and their participation was insignificant. Then the 73rd and 74th Amendments were passed in 1992 and 1993 concerning rural local self-government and urban local-self administration (municipalities) and established the reservation of 33% of all seats in panchayats and municipalities for women.

After the reservation it was supposed that women will have strong representation however Hust (2004) maintains that the representation of women is not adequate in itself as it does not offer the possibility of active participation. Hust states that in India most of the women lag behind, because they are uneducated and more dependent on men. This is the reason why many scholars such as Omvedt (2005), Chattopadhayay & Duflo (2003) and Mishra (1999) have used the word 'proxy' or 'token' for the women who are vested only with the formal power while the real power still resided with the male members of their family.

Gender Quota: Bihar Model

Following the suggestions of the amendment acts, the state of India reserved 33% of seats for women in the local self-government (Panchayati Raj Institutions). But the state of Bihar has 4 gone forward of this quota limit and has through the Bihar Panchayat Raj Ordinance introduced a reservation of 50% for women in local government institutions: (The Bihar Panchayat Raj Ordinance, 2006, Section 13, No. 2 and 3). The reform in Bihar is the first of its kind in India and according to the information made available by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) there is no other country where the local governance has adopted a reservation of fifty per cent (IDEA 2006). Bihar has a total no of 9032 local government bodies; it includes 8463 Gram Panchayats, 531 Panchayat Semites, and 38 Zilla Parishads. Following the Bihar Panchayat Raj Ordinance 2006, elections were held and women candidates got elected in the excess of 54%. This is a significant increase in women representation and it is believed that such a reservation policy will have a positive effect on women's empowerment.

Conceptual Framework for Obstacles and Research Method

To understand the factors those restrain the entry and participation of women in political field three concepts, presented below, have been identified. They have been used by (Shvedova 2005) in earlier research about the obstacles that women elected to parliaments face—

1. Socio-economic obstacles
2. Psychological/Ideological obstacles
3. Political/Institutional obstacles

Selection of geographical area :

The unique social political and economic environment of Bihar is the primary reason for selecting it for the study. The population is 103, 80 million (approx.) in which the female population is 49, 61 million (approx.). The literacy rate is 63.82 per cent, in case of males (73.39 per cent) and females (53.33 per cent) , the All-India figures were 75.26 per cent and 53.67 per cent respectively. An overwhelmingly large percentage of women are either illiterate or educated below primary level, and a majority are employed in agriculture. The labour force participation rate of women in Bihar was only 13.8% in rural areas and 6.5% in urban areas in 2004-05; the corresponding percentages for India as a whole were 32.7% and 16.6% respectively. These figures are alarming and thus compelling researchers across disciplines to take a serious look at the situation and bring some possible measures for policy makers. Another reason for selecting Bihar as the location for the study was the change that has taken place there in the form of 50 per cent reservation for women in elected bodies of local government institutions. It has opened the door for women from different social settings and has given them an opportunity to come into power. Thus it is a matter of interest to explore whether a quantitative rise in the representation of women in political decision-making can transform into qualitative changes in the participation of women. The collection of data was completed by a field study in Bihar, adopting a qualitative method, based on the need of information about people's own experiences and interpretation of their own social situation. 5

Selection of respondents

The study was conducted by interviewing women members from the different levels of the 'Panchayati Raj' system (Sarpanch, Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Panchayat Samiti, Chairman and Vice Chairman of Zila Parishad and other members). The principle of maximal variation was used to find elected women with different backgrounds, as the literature suggests that the background for the elected women is an important factor in determining their participation in the PRI's. The thirty women selected had varied characteristics regarding religion, caste, age, wealth, education, political background of the family. The interviews were semi-structured as this allows more flexibility than structured interviews or surveys and permits for the exploration of new topics and ideas rather than to depend only on concepts and questions defined in advance of the interview. Also to avoid the risk of questions being answered by their male family members or assistants, a personal interview technique was the most suitable for this study. Apart from the data collected through interviews, the other sources were official reports of the government of Bihar. The secondary sources were mainly books and articles published in journals and other published literature related to the research work.

Data collection

As for primary sources 30 women serving representatives from different level of local self-government institutions have been selected and interviewed. The interviews were made according to the preferences of the interviewees. The location of interviews was mostly in Patna, but respondents were from Patna, Araria, Arwal, Gopalganj, Bhojpur, Gaya, Sitamarhi, Kishanganj, Munger, Purnia, Bihta, Mokama, Hajipur, and Samastipur. Interviews were sometimes held in the homes of the interviewee and at the other times at

the training camps for the panchayat members, also at the Bihar Rajya Panchayat Samiti office in Patna.

Findings

To present a better description about the obstacles three broad concepts produced by Shvedova (2005) has been used. These three concepts are: Socio-economic obstacles, Psychological/Ideological obstacles and Political/Institutional obstacles.

1. **Socio-economic obstacles-**

Shvedova (2005) argues that there is no doubt that the social and economic status of women in society has a direct influence on their participation in political institutions and elected bodies. As stated by her the socio-economic obstacles that have impacts on women's participation can be categorized in many ways such as: poverty and unemployment; lack of adequate financial resources; illiteracy and limited access to education and choice of professions; and dual burden of domestic tasks and professional obligations. During the research the present study also found out some of these obstacles which can be described as follows: 6

a) **Condition of income and occupation and choice of profession-**

In a developing country like India the condition of income and occupation and choice of profession also determine the participation of women in political offices. There are many examples of women who cannot participate fully because of their poor condition of income. For example, respondent no. 18 argues, "If financial condition is bad then we can't work. It is not possible to attend the meeting twice in a month on very small amount of money. If I decide to go to the meeting then I have to spend more. There is a need to increase allowance." It is found from the study that most of the women members are living in poverty. They are unemployed housewives from peasant's family of lower income group. To sustain the family they have to give maximum time in their family work or agriculture. In this process they find less financial support to expend for attending meetings. In some families, they are principal bread earners. In the sample it was noticed that some of the women members are the main bread earners in their family. Thus in such conditions, women participation in the local self-governing institutions does not come to the high level.

b) **Lack of proper education**

It is evident from the sample that most of women respondents have only basic education. Without proper education it is very difficult for women to discuss for their concerns. According to Kabeer (2005) access to education can bring cognitive ability which is essential for women's capacity to question, reflection, action and knowledge. Furthermore, women cannot understand the issues and working of political bodies if they have not ability to read between the lines. Respondent no. 2 stated that: "As I am not well educated others alternate me. When I show interest in any work they (men) say that you are not able to understand this. The party also puts a lot of limitations and restrictions on me. I think a less educated women like me have no status. Sometimes I feel frustrated because other people are doing all the works on behalf of me and I am ignorant of all. I think this is only because of my lack of education." Thus it can be argued that the lack of

education is an important factor that hinders women to participate in the meetings. Without proper education they feel hard to understand the rules of politics. Thus the education is the most vital channel to encourage women so that they can raise their voices about politics, their problems and issues related to them and to other people.

c. **Division of labour:**

A predominant view is that women are to accept the household role in the society, and this effect of socialization is strong enough to prevent their entry into politics. This is the reason, Shvedova (2005) argues that traditions continue to emphasize and often dictate, women's primary role as mothers and housewives. In many countries a traditional, strong, patriarchal value system favours division of labour which affects the growth and participation of women in any political process. Similar condition was seen during the field work of present study where respondent no.13 described about her difficulties like this, "When I informed my family that I am going to stand for elections they opposed. According to them I should devote myself for domestic works and not to think for political life. But even though I stood for 7 elections and won. Now I have become very busy because I am performing my traditional works and also doing political works. Nobody at home wants to help me because they think that cooking, washing, cleaning and taking care of children and elders are only my responsibility." It is evident from the statement that there are many works which women have to perform in traditional societies like cooking and taking care of children. Then it is really hard for them to get free time and even to think about coming in public life.

D. **Dual burden of domestic tasks and professional commitments-**

The dual burden of domestic and professional works and responsibilities are one of those factors that restrain women's participation in the political system. Like many other countries of the world, women in India also are doing a substantial part of domestic work. So it is natural that they have no choice but to devote much of their time to accomplish the basic needs of their families. Respondent no. 11 said, "I belong to a business family. Our family business is fishing. Now my in-laws are in old age and not in good health so I and my husband have to do all things. I have a one year old daughter who still does not go to school. So I have to take care of her also. Besides all these things I have to be punctual in my political works also. I am Mukhiya so I have some responsibilities toward my people. I also try to render my services to them. It is hard to accomplish all these things together." Along with some women have full-time careers like teachers, lawyers, doctors etc. Thus starting a political career is like a third job and then it is like overwork. Many women are trying to balance their family life with the demands of their work which is a hard task.

2. **Psychological/Ideological obstacles:**

There are also some psychological and ideological obstacles that restrain women to enter and participate in political life. In a traditional society like India, women have been nurtured to fulfil the domestic responsibilities first then anything after that. At first they have to overcome their own lack of confidence then they have to fight

with the traditional norms and attitudes of their surroundings. The respondents explained about these obstacles in different ways.

A. **Self-esteem and self-confidence-**

According to Shvedova (2005) lack of confidence in women members is one of the main reasons for women's under-representation in formal political institutions, including parliaments, governments and political parties. This can be seen while discussion with some women members in local self-government institutions. Respondent no. 29 stated, "I belong to an agricultural family. I never went out of the house to talk for public works. Honestly speaking, I never thought about joining politics. When my family and other neighbours discussed about my name for the Mukhiya, I just denied. I thought I would not be able to do this because I do not know anything about the politics." This statement clearly shows the lower level of self-confidence in that women member. This is not only one story. There were some other members with same kind of feelings. 8

B. **The norms, cultural patterns—**

Societal limitations of rural India require that women do not participate alone in public spaces. The customary perception of women's role being in the house is still strongly prevailing in rural India. Women who work with male colleagues in political meetings are looked down upon as women of suspicious personality. Women also have a restriction of timing as they cannot work outside after evening. According to them it is partly because of the tradition and partly because of the security. Respondent No. 7 stated, "I cannot work outside for a long

time because after evening it is not safe for a woman to be out of the house. After evening or in the late night you can find many drunken men. There is also a chance to be robbed. So being a woman it is difficult to face these types of incidents."

C. **Attitudes of their surroundings –**

On the basis of discussion with respondents, it can be divided into two broad categories.

i. **Lack of support from the family**

It is very interesting to find out that the women who contested elections on their own initiatives faced more problems within and outside the family in comparison to the women who contested elections on the initiative of their husbands or family members. Respondent no, 12 stated that, "Those women who got support from their family are very lucky. I do not belong to that category. I faced obstacles by my husband and other family members regarding Panchayat elections but still, I won and came to the gram panchayat. I want to do so many things for my people but I am not sure I will be able to do this."

ii. **Adverse treatment from bureaucracy** :

The interviews reveal that the adverse treatment by the bureaucracy has been a hurdle for participation for women. Respondents reported that they feel disregarded by the clerks in the administration. This feeling is voiced in the following quote of respondent no. 18 "I think something has to be done by the government about the bureaucracy. If I compare to men I feel women are not treated with due respect. The bureaucrats will not talk to you unless you are a very important

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person. The thing become more adverse if you are a woman and uneducated as then they even don't greet you."

D. The lack of media attention :

Shvedova (2005) argues that the media in any society has two roles: to serve as a chronicler of current events and as an informer of public opinion, thereby fostering different points of view. But it is unfortunate that the mass media often have a tendency to minimize the exposure of occasions and organizations related to women. Respondent no. 16 said, "There is a lack of appropriate attention about the activities of women members here. Because of this there is a lack of public awareness about women's issues and development works done by women." 9

3. Political/Institutional obstacles :

Women are limited in political arena by the political and institutional obstacles also. As Shvedova (2005) argues that masculine model of politics restrain women in politics. According to her men dominate the political arena and formulate the rules of the political game; they define the standards for evaluation. For example, the political model, as Shvedova (2005) argues, is based on the idea of winners and losers, competition and confrontation, rather than on shared respect, teamwork and consensus building. This environment is habitually unfamiliar with women. Thus, according to Shvedova (2005), the presence of this male-dominated model of politics results in women rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics. The present study suggests that the obstacles related to the political system proved to be many. In relation to earlier research all these obstacles can be well-matched with the obstacles that Shvedova mentioned. Thus the present study makes those aspects more strong.

A. Lack of support from the political party:

Shvedova (2005) argues that women play important roles in campaigning and organizing support for their parties, hitherto they rarely occupy decision-making positions in these structures. The research suggests that gender bias on the part of the electorate is usually presented as one of the main reasons for the fact that political parties resist selecting female candidates. (Sacchet, 2005) This condition was evident from the responses of women members as many women members complained about the behaviour of political party. According to the respondent No. 15, "Some people support me. On the other hand some of the party leaders always oppose me. Most of them are senior to me. Consequently I am facing obstructions to do something new."

B. Kind of electoral system:

While the government has successfully launched the quota system in the local self-government institutions it is also very important that there should have some supplementary policies that can support the system. The present study suggests that there is a lack of proper training and capacity building programs for the elected women members. Respondent no.26, states, "Although the government has applied reservation for us (women), but I think it has no concern to make the women members trained. Although some of them (women members) may not perform up to the mark, but it is evident that women members are more responsible than the male members." She further

argues, "It is the government as well as Panchayat department responsibility to render proper training to them."

C. Role of women's organizations -

In many countries women's organizations are working with political and governmental institutions to facilitate women's nomination and election. It results in increased women's representation within legislative bodies. Yet, according to Shvedova (2005), in recently developed or partially developed democracies there is a limited connection and collaboration between women politicians and women's organizations or other broad interest organizations such as trade and labour unions. While talking to the women political representatives of local 10 self-governmental institutions in Bihar it was found that there is also more or less the same condition. Respondent no.10, explained, "We have not any well-defined or well organized connections with any women organization. I think if we had good communication with them it would be a great opportunity to discuss about women issues and then we can have more strong voice."

D. Prevailing political culture:

During the research it was found that the political culture prevailing there also hinders the women to enter and participate in the political institutions. When asked about political constrains the informants stated that intervention by male members is the key problem in participation. Pointing out this problem respondent no. 3, said:, "It is very hard. They (men) don't want us to speak. They think that we cannot understand anything and says that you are newcomer in this field and it will take long time to understand all things. My point is that if I will not get chance to participate how can I learn panchayat works?" They also said that party intervention is the most prominent problem. Respondent no.16, said, "There are so many constraints and interventions by the political parties. I don't want to stand for the elections next time due to the political chaos here. There is so much intra-party clash in my party that I can't work. I feel uncomfortable in such type of environment."

The prevailing political culture is also a major deterrent factor for women. In the present political setup the qualities of commitment and honesty are considered to be out dated and crafty strategies are adopted to win elections. In this atmosphere, even women who are already in the political field rarely give vent to their feelings of disgust and frustration. Violence has also come to dominate the PRI elections, thus making participation of women more difficult and problematic. Most of such violence is consequential of the caste differences where people belonging to lower castes are tortured and murdered for standing against upper caste candidates. Booth capturing have emerged as an accepted norm of the electoral process. Added to this, criminalization of politics is another unpleasant element prevailing in elections. All these things prevent women from joining politics.

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study was to find out the factors that restrain the entry and participation of women in political field. Constraints or the obstacles during women's political entry and participation were judged by using the three broad concepts produced by Shvedova (2005). These three concepts are: Socio-economic obstacles, Psychological/Ideological obstacles and Political/Institutional obstacles.

As far as socio-economic obstacles are concerned the present study found out some of the same obstacles which Shvedova has described. These include poverty and unemployment; lack of adequate financial resources; illiteracy and limited access to education and choice of professions; and dual burden of domestic tasks and professional obligations. While psychological/ideological obstacles are concerned lack of self-confidence, traditional norms, negative attitude of their surroundings and lack of media attention were found out that clearly supports Shedova's work. It is very interesting to discover that the women who contested elections on their own initiatives faced more problems within and 11 outside the family in comparison to women who contested elections on the initiative of their husbands or family members. In the category of political/institutional obstacles the present study suggests one more obstacle that is 'prevailing political culture' besides Shedova's obstacles which includes the role of political party, kind of electoral system and the role of women organizations.

In summery it can be said that the government of India is trying to empower the women through various economic/socio/political policies and programs but there are still some gaps to be bridged. The result of the present study shows the goal of women's empowerment will not be accomplished by reservations alone, and there are a number of obstacles identified by the respondents. It can be noted that the restraining factors are so many and so diverse. Steps are being taken to overcome these hindrances, but it is a very time-consuming process. A structure, which has been created over centuries, cannot be dismantled within a short span of time. To expedite and speed up this process it is essential to implement some supplementary policies which encourage the self-confidence of women, build women's capabilities and remove operational obstacles. There is a need to change many aspects of the existing gender relations, power distribution and to take hard decisions concerning power-sharing.

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LIST OF RESPONDENTS

Sl. No.	Age	Caste	Religion	Education	Wealth	Occupation	Political Family Background	Elected in which layer of the PRI's
1	40	Muslim	Muslim	5th Class	50000	House wife	Yes	Mukhiya
2	56	General	Hindu	Literate	240000	Agriculture	No	Ward Sadasya
3	29	S.C.	Hindu	5th class	18000	Labour	No	Ward Sadasya
4	58	Muslim	Muslim	5th Class	28000	Agriculture	No	Ward Sadasya
5	35	S.C.	Hindu	Literate	50000	House wife	No	Zilla Sadasya
6	33	General	Hindu	Intermediate	18000	Teacher	Yes	Mukhiya