

Empowering Women Through Panchayati Raj Institution: A Study on Women Representatives in SPSR Nellore District, Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

The term 'empowerment' is essentially an enabling process to make people capable of taking decisions concerning their development and for changing their lives for better. The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), through 73rd Constitutional Amendment, have been designed to empower the people at three appropriate levels. The Amendment provided institutional mechanism and was meant to rekindle the flame of self-governance. The most important aspect of the widening democratic decentralisation has been the reservation of seats, for the women and Dalits. Studies show that by extending reservation to women, PRIs have certainly led to the increased participation of women in panchayats as voters, candidates, as elected members of PRIs taking part in decision making, planning, implementation, and evaluation. However, certain constraints which stem from traditional village institutions and familial and socio-cultural forces still remain. In this context, the article attempts to study the emerging patterns of women leadership and empowerment.

Key Words: Panchayati Raj Institution, Women Representatives and Empowerment

1. Introduction

The rural development strategy in India has undergone a paradigm shift from 'philanthropy' to 'welfare' and at present from 'welfare' to 'rights based approach' towards poverty alleviation. India is an incipient welfare state with inclusive growth as planned strategy of rural development. The participation and representation of people in planning process is as important as ownership and leadership of delivery process at grassroots. The basic objective of the democratic decentralisation by reactivation of the Panchayati Raj system was to realise Gandhiji's concept of 'Gram Swaraj'. Extending reservation to women in PRJs has certainly led to the increased participation of women in Panchayats as voters,

candidates and as elected members taking part in decision-making, planning implementation and evaluation (**Mathur, 2006**). While reservation has resolved some of the problems, the constraints which stem from traditional village institutions and familial and socio-cultural forces still remain (**Sharma, 1998**). Empowerment is the most frequently used term in the development discourse in contemporary times. In the World Summit for Social Development held at Copenhagen in March 1995, empowerment featured prominently as an objective. The Draft Declaration of the Third Preparatory Committee adopted by the heads of states and governments asserted that 'the most productive policies and investments are those which empower people to maximise their capacities, resources and opportunities'. It also emphasises that the main objective of development is to empower people, particularly women, to strengthen their capacities. This is to be achieved through the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and wellbeing of society (**Bura Neera, 2005**).

Empowerment is concerned with power and particularly with changing the power relations between individuals and groups in society. Women's empowerment is thus the process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and gender-based discrimination of women in all the institutions and structures of society (**Batliwala, 2013**). Panchayati Raj for women is at present in the transitional phase and women are not adequately empowered in practice to play an effective role because of social, economic and political factors. Women have waited for centuries without striving hard to achieve their rightful position and status. Only when women succeed in getting larger political decision making power, they can use it to formulate necessary enactments and safeguards to eliminate gender bias. Therefore, gaining of political power is a prerequisite without which other societal injustices can never be rectified (**Parida and Nayak, 2009**).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research avails both primary and secondary data in Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh. Keeping in view the objectives of the study the data for the present study is collected both from primary and secondary sources. The primary data is collected by administering by administering a pre-tested Interview Schedule.

Sample Design

In Nellore district there are 485 elected women representatives at three-tiers of Panchayat institutions as Sarpanches. The community wise number of serpanches is shown in the Table. Out of them three fourths of the sarpanches (75%), i.e. 360 were selected by simple random sampling method. Care was taken to cover all three revenue divisions of the district. So the universe of the study constitutes 485 women representatives.

Sl. No.	Women's Community	No. of Reserved for Women	Percentage
1	ST	67	14
2	SC	133	27
3	BC	53	11
4	OC	232	48
Total		485	100

Source: District Collector, District Election Authority, SPSR Nellore District, 07.03.2020

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics

1.Age

Age is a crucial factor which explains the personal and psychological maturity of the individuals. Age indicates patience, endurance and understanding of the society and people. The age of the respondents has been presented in the Table 1

Table 1
Age and Caste of the Respondents

Sl. No.	Age (years)	General	SC	ST	OBC	Total
1	18 – 30	77(33%)	8(13%)	7(31%)	10(23%)	102(28%)
2	31 – 40	67(29%)	48(76%)	9(41%)	19(45%)	143(40%)
3	41 – 50	58(25%)	4(6%)	4(18%)	10(23%)	76(21%)
4	51 - 75	30(13%)	3(5%)	2(9%)	4(9%)	39(11%)
Total		232(100%)	63(100%)	22(100%)	43(100%)	360(100%)

The table shows that 68% of the respondents are in the age group of below 40 years of age, which reflects the demographic profile of the women respondents. This is also largely in conformity with the demographic profile of women wherein nearly 65% are in the age group of below 45. As regards the social background factor, no conclusive inference can be drawn since 23% of respondents belong to SC/ST/OBC categories. Many respondents did not wish to state their social background and hence were included under the general category.

2 Marital Status

Marital status describes a person's legal relationship status, typically categorized as single, married, widowed, divorced or separated and is used on forms for personal data, census or applications to define if someone is married or not, including variations like civil unions or common-law. The marital status of the respondents is presented in the Table 2.

Table 2
Marital Status of the Respondents

Sl. No.	Marital Status	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Married	289	80
2	Unmarried	36	10
3	Widow	25	7
4	Divorced	10	3
Total		360	100

The table portrays that 80 per cent of the respondents are married and 10 per cent of them are unmarried. It is concluded that majority of the respondents (80%) are married

3 Educational Status

Educational status refers to the highest level of formal learning an individual has achieved, often categorized by years of schooling or specific qualifications like high school diplomas, vocational certificates or university degrees. It is used in resumes, job applications, and research to understand socioeconomic factors, health outcomes and societal development. The educational status of the respondents has been shown in the Table 3

Table 3
Educational Status of the Respondents

Sl. No.	Marital Status	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Illiterate	37	10
2	Primary	64	18
3	High School	169	47
4	Graduate	79	22
5	Ph.D.	3	1
6	Others	8	2
Total		360	100

In terms of educational background, 47 per cent of the respondents have high school education, 22 per cent are graduates, 18 per cent have primary education and 10 per cent of respondents are illiterates. By and large, it is concluded that majority of the respondents (47%) have high school education.

4 Income Status

Income Status generally refers to an individual's or household's financial standing, often categorized as low, medium or high based on earnings, and is crucial for government benefits, taxes (like Income Tax Return - ITR status) and socioeconomic classification, with key aspects including income type and status checks for government services or tax filings. The economic status of the respondents is shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Economic Status of the Respondents

Sl. No.	Income Status (Rs.)	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	< 5000	152	42
2	5000 – 10000	63	18
3	10000 – 20000	52	14
4	20000- 30000	13	4
5	Above 30000	80	22
Total		360	100

The investigator classified the privileged and the non-privileged group based on educational and economic background – that is those whose income is above 10000 and whose educational background is 10th standard pass and above as privileged and the rest as a non-privileged group. Nearly 60% of respondents belong to the non-privileged group, which again is similar to the universe (of the study, By and large, it is concluded that majority of the respondents (42 %) have less then Rs.5000 income..

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYAT RAJ INSTITUTION

The present paper appraises and discusses the responses of the women representatives of the PRIs in SPSR Nellore District, Arunachal Pradesh regarding the status, participation etc.

1. Women representatives are treated equally as men in your society

There are disparities between men and women in several respects in the present society and gender disparity is no exemption. In some cases women are not treated on par with men. This can be also observed in the panchayat raj institutions. The Table 5 shows the responses of the women elected representatives on whether the women representatives are treated equally on par with men in the society

Table 5
Women representative are treated equally on par with men in society

Sl. No.	Women representative are treated on par with men in the Society	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	245	68
2	Disagree	50	14
3	Undecided	65	18
Total		360	100

The table portrays that 245 respondents (68 %) agreed that women representatives are treated equally on par with men whereas 50 respondents (14 %) disagreed that women representatives are treated equally on par with men. But, 65 respondents (18 %) are undecided to respond. It is concluded that majority of the respondents (68 %) agreed that women representatives are treated equally on par with men. Thus, indicate the progress toward gender equality in representation however they urged for more improvement.

2. Advocate for greater women's empowerment in the society

Empowerment of women socially, economically and politically is dire essential for the development society. The information on whether the women elective representatives advocate for greater women's empowerment has been collected and collated in the Table 6

Table 6

Advocate for greater women's empowerment in the society

Sl. No.	Advocate for greater women's empowerment in the society	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	346	96
2	Disagree	14	4
3	Undecided	0	0
Total		360	100

The table describes that 346 respondents (96 %) agreed that they are advocating for greater women's empowerment while 14 respondents (4 %) disagreed that they are advocating for greater women's empowerment. By and large, it is perorated that majority of the respondents (96 %) agreed to advocate for greater women's empowerment. The respondents highlight the relevance of women's empowerment and expressed to support to it.

3. Education empowered women to actively participate in Panchayat elections

Education is one of the key aspects of empowerment of women as it gives them to ponder over and decision making. The information on the responses of the women elective representatives on whether education empowered women to actively participate in Panchayat elections has been collected and collated in the Table 7.

Table 7

Education empowered women to actively participate in Panchayat elections

Sl. No.	Education Empowered Women To Actively Participate In Panchayat Elections	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	353	98
2	Disagree	0	00
3	Undecided	7	2
Total		360	100

The table limpidly shows that that 353 respondents (98 %) agreed that education empowered women to readily and actively participate in Panchayat elections while mere 7 respondents (2 %) undecided to respond over this aspect. Above all, it is concluded that majority of the respondents (98%) agreed that education empowered women to actively participate in Panchayat election. The respondents depict the vital role of education in enhancing women's involvement in local governance.

4. Women are less ambitious in politics compared to men

Everybody has ample ambitions in their desired field and try for fulfill them. But all of them cannot fulfill all their ambitions as some have less and others have many more depending on their luck, chances and by God's grace. The information on the responses on whether the elected women representatives have less ambitious in politics compared to men has been elicited and the responses are dovetailed in the Table 8.

Table 8
Women are less ambitious in politics compared to men

Sl. No.	Women are less ambitious in politics compared to men	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	65	18
2	Disagree	245	68
3	Undecided	50	14
Total		360	100

It is observed from the table that 245 respondents (68 %) disagreed that women are less ambitious in politics compared to men while 65 respondents (18 %) agreed that elected women representatives have less ambitious in politics compared to men. On the contrary, 50 respondents (14 %) undecided to respond on it. Above all, it is concluded that majority of the respondents (68 %) disagreed that elected women representatives have less ambitious in politics compared to men

5. Electing a representative often hinges more on the political party than on the Candidate's capability

In the present political atmosphere the representatives are elected basing on the image of the political party rather the capability of the candidate. The information on respondents whether Electing a representative often hinges more on the political party than on the candidates capability has been elicited and the details are furnished in the Table 9.

Table 9
Electing on the image of the political party rather the capability of the candidate

Sl. No.	Electing a representative often hinges more on the political party than on the candidates capability	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	101	28
2	Disagree	209	58
3	Undecided	50	14
Total		360	100

The table portrays that 209 respondents (58 %) disagreed that electing a representative often hinges more on the political party than on the candidates' capability while 101 respondents (28 %) agreed that electing a representative often hinges more on the political party than on the candidates' capability. But 50 respondents (14 %) undecided to respond. Above all, it is concluded that majority of the respondents (58 %) disagreed that electing a representative often hinges more on the political party than on the

candidates' capability. The respondents highlighted that political parties also play role in electing the representatives apart from individual capability of the candidate.

6. Enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat

Women constitute 50 per cent of the population but they have no their share of representation in Panchayat Raj Institutions. The information on the responses from the elected women on whether there is a need for enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat has been elicited and the details are furnished in the Table 10.

Table 10
Enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat

Sl. No.	Enhancing the inclusion of women PRIs	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	324	90
2	Disagree	7	2
3	Undecided	29	8
Total		360	100

It is obviously noticed from the table that 324 respondents (90 %) expressed that there is a need for enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat whereas mere 7 respondents (2 %) expressed that there is no need for enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat. On the contrary 29 respondents (29 %) undecided to express their opinion. Above all, it is concluded that majority of the respondents (90 %) expressed that there is a need for enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat. The respondents reflected the positive changes towards gender parity in the Gram Panchayat.

7. Encourage people to support the women representatives

Support of people for women representative is important and dire essential for their active participation. The information on whether the women representatives encourage people to support them for development has been collected and the details are presented in the Table 11.

Table 11
Encouraging people to support the women representative

Sl. No.	Encourage people to support them	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	360	100
2	Disagree	0	0
3	Undecided	0	0
Total		360	100

The table explicitly presents that all the respondents (100 %) agreed that the women representatives encourage people to support them for development. It highlights the necessity of people support for women representatives to build their confidence in the representation

8. Womens participation in PRI further influence them

The information on whether womens participation in PRI further influence them to engage in social, community, and political activities has been collected and the details are presented in the Table 12.

Table 12
Womens Participation in PRI further influences political activities

Sl. No.	Womens participation in PRI further political activities	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	360	100
2	Disagree	0	0.00
3	Undecided	0	0.00
Total		360	100

The table crystal clearly shows that all the respondents (100 %) agreed that womens participation in PRI further influence them to engage in social, community, and political activities. This strong approval, suggests that such participation not only strengthens women but also encourages their broader engagement in various societal roles.

9. Getting support from the male elected representatives

The information on whether the elected representatives get complete support from the male elected representatives has been elicited and the details are dovetailed in the Table 13

Table 13
Getting complete support from the male elected representatives

Sl. No.	Getting complete support from the male elected representatives	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	281	78
2	Disagree	36	10
3	Undecided	43	12
Total		360	100

It is quite clear from the table that 281 respondents (78 %) expressed that they are getting complete support from the male elected representatives while 36 respondents (10 %) expressed that they are not getting complete support from the male elected representatives. But 43 respondents (12 %) undecided to respond on this aspect. Above all, it is concluded that majority of the respondents (78 %) expressed that they are getting complete support from the male elected representatives. Thus, it highlighted the need of efforts to foster inclusive and supportive environment for women in political roles.

10. Participated in Panchayat elections as household influenced

The information on whether participated in panchayat elections because if their household has influenced has been collected and the details are furnished in the Table 14.

Table 14

Participate in Panchayat elections because household influenced

Sl. No.	Panchayat elections because your household influenced you to do so.	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Agree	166	46
2	Disagree	180	50
3	Undecided	14	04
Total		360	100

The table presents that 180 respondents (50%) disagree that they contested in the Panchayat elections because their household influenced them to do so and 166 respondents (46 %) agreed that they contested in the Panchayat elections because their household influenced them to do so. On the contrary, mere 4 per cent of the respondents could not decide how and why they contested in the Panchayat elections. By and large it is concluded that fifty per cent of the respondents disagree that they contested in the Panchayat elections because their household influenced them to do so

SUGGESTIONS

It is essential to provide targeted training and capacity-building programs to women representatives in PRI. It would improve the knowledge regarding the authorities and responsibilities within PRIs which can enhance the leadership abilities specifically for women elected representatives. Additionally, ensuring women's access to financial resources is crucial, and allocating Panchayat funds specifically for women-centric activities can be initiated. This can be achieved by facilitating loans, grants and subsidies for women-led development initiatives. Moreover, gender-specific policies must be considered to address the unique needs and hurdles women encountered in rural areas. Establishing a forum for women representatives to interact, encourage, support and collaborate without fear of discrimination can encourage more inclusive and effective local governance. Furthermore, encouraging women to actively participate in elections is crucial and to hold leadership positions at different levels to strengthen their participation and representation for overall women empowerment. Initiatives to promote education and awareness of women's rights, roles, and responsibilities would not only bring political upliftment but also improve the overall development of women in society.

CONCLUSION

The present analysis shows that 68% of the respondents are in the age group of below 40 years and 23% of respondents belong to SC/ST/OBC categories, Majority of the respondents (80%) are married and 47% have high school education.. Majority of the respondents (42 %) have less than Rs.5000 income.. Majority of the respondents (68 %) agreed that women representatives are treated equally on par with men. Thus, indicate the progress toward gender equality in representation however they urged for more improvement. Majority of the respondents (96 %) agreed to advocate for greater women's empowerment. And 98% agreed that education empowered women to actively participate in Panchayat election. Majority of the respondents (68 %) disagreed that elected women representatives have less ambitious in politics compared to men Majority of the respondents (58 %) disagreed that electing a representative often

hinges more on the political party than on the candidates' capability. Majority of the respondents (90 %) expressed that there is a need for enhancement in the inclusion of women in the Gram Panchayat. All the respondents (100 %) agreed that the women representatives encourage people to support them for development and women's participation in PRI further influence them to engage in social, community, and political activities. Majority of the respondents (78 %) expressed that they are getting complete support from the male elected representatives. Fifty per cent of the respondents disagree that they contested in the Panchayat elections because their household influenced them to do so.

Women's active participation in the electoral process in recent decades has confirmed the initial hopes for women's emancipation in Indian society. Achieving gender equality in the society is very crucial for the socio-economic and political progress of the community. Many elected women representatives experienced improved status both personally and socially after being elected to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). They believed that PRI involvement boosted their confidence and allowed them to participate directly in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, they continued to encounter obstacles in active political participation due to socio-cultural norms within the tribal society. Though reservation has enhanced women's participation in the electoral process of the local self-governance system in a large way, women leadership has come under immense pressure due to the criminalisation of Panchayat elections. Owing to illiteracy and poor socio-economic status, the women leaders could not assert their influence on the decision making process. Attitudinal change in both men and women is required to encourage rural women to enter into politics. Education can certainly play an important role in bringing social and political awareness among people. No doubt, the positive improvement could be seen in the condition of women in Nellore district due to participation and representation of women in Gram Panchayat. Nevertheless, further stringent efforts are direly needed to address towards empowering women within the society by creating more inclusive, equitable and supportive environment for women in politics.

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