

PANCHAYAT, GENDER, AND POWER IN BIHAR

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Abstract

This paper examines women experiences in the local bodies and how they have altered the gender relations through political representation in the rural social order. The collection of data was completed by a field study in district of Bhojpur and Jehanabad in Bihar, adopting a qualitative method based on the interview. The paper tries to understand the changes in women's life especially political knowledge, participation, network, protest, their role in society. In this respect, it appears that women reservation is an important tool to reduce male domination. This might bring women concerns in local bodies to a certain extent, thus women may gain confidence to deal with their problem.

The equal participation of women in political life in the Seneca Fall convention¹ in New York in 1848, to demand equal political right is seen as the central issue in the discourse of the liberal framework. Historically, androcentric (male centered) assumptions and arguments produced knowledge which tried to exclude women from the political sphere. The androcentric assumptions like private versus public which developed its validity from women's restrictions to the private area on the basis of their natural role in society. Politics is considered as the public activity that is to be done by men. The demands of political participation of women by feminist movement are understood as a violation of established gender roles. Despite that feminists continued tried to expose the men domination in the political arena. As results, women got equal political rights such as the voting rights. However, it did not help women to create space for themselves to the extent that could make them visible in the political representation. This kind of equality advanced by women could not translate into substantive forms of democratic

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participation. After the realization of this fact by the feminists, we can see political shifting within feminist movement such as demand for a quota to ensure women's presence in the politics; hope to translate into women friendly political structure and policies. In other words, we can say that it was progressing within feminist politics which shifted "politics of ideology" to "politics of presence". For instance, Anne Phillip (1995) noted that "The shift from direct to representative democracy has shifted the emphasis from who the politicians are to what (policies preference and ideas) they represent" (Phillip, 1995, p. 4). It argued that policies formulated for any group cannot be significant if there was no representation of those sections and decisions during the formulation of the policies.

In India anti-colonial struggle tried to bring women into the political realm and played a significant role in the nationalist movement. Women got voting rights in 1921. However, during constituency debate in 1946, Sarojini Naidu and Hansa Mehta opposed the women reservation and argued that women participated in large number in the nationalist struggle which ensured substantive equality in the political sphere in the form of voting rights. There is no need for separate women reservation. Mary John noted that "Sarojini Naidu made it unequivocally clear that women did not want preferential treatment [i.e. any form of nomination or reservation], for this would amount to an admission of women's "inferiority" (John, 2017, p. 4). Hansa Mehta said "the women's organisation to which I have the honour to belong has never asked for reserved seats, for quotas, or for separate electorates. What we have asked for is social justice, economic justice, and political justice".² Sarojini Naidu and Hansa Mehta were failed to understand that women rights to vote could not challenge or eliminate the androcentric nature of politics. However, after national freedom, Indian constitution provides equal opportunity irrespective of sex in all spheres including political participation. The reality was exposed in "Towards Equality Report" published in 1974. The report showed that women progress was very minimal in the socio-economical and political sphere. This report emphasized that "Political status of women can define as the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in the shaping and sharing of power in the value given by the society to this role of women" (Towards Equality Report, 1974, p. 283).

In 1992, the Indian government passed the law which is mandatory for local bodies to reserve seats for women, unfortunately women reservation bill is yet to be passed at the national and state level legislature. However, the one-third seat is reserved for women in village, block and district level. There are hope and possibility to alter gender relation through women representative in local government. It realized that decentralization would further enhance the legitimacy of the democratic system. In this context, it also came to be recognized that without involving women in the processes of decentralized governance, the development goals will not be achieved. Feminist and other liberal intellectual's advocates that there is need to address and introduce special measures for recruiting women in political decision-making. The argument is that there is a need for "Institutionalized counter measures" for dealing with "institutionalized inequalities" (Mazumdar, 1997, p. 19).

In 2006, Bihar was the first state which increased 50% reservation for women in the local government. Following the Bihar Panchayat Raj Ordinance 2006, elections were held, and women candidates got elected more than 54%. This is a significant number of women representation in local administration and it is believed that it would have helped positive effect on women's empowerment. In this context, Bihar provides us fascinating study to explore gender dimension in politics where the upper caste like Bhoihar, Rajputs, and Kayasthas used to maintain their hold for long time and Yadav Koeris, Kurmi and other OBCs³ after the 1990s in Bihar (Singh and Pankaj, 2005). Caste, class, and violence are the key role in electoral politics in Bihar that are filled by upper caste male to middle caste male. Women are invisible from this masculine politics. Singh and Pankaj recognized that in rural Bihar "The upper and middle Hindu castes and Muslims are more patriarchal in their social and family more than the SCs/STs. Less sheltered or secluded within the four walls of their homes, the SC/ ST women were more assertive than the women of upper castes and the OBCs of rural society" (Singh and Pankaj, 2005, p. 425). In this context empowerment is not just representation in the local bodies through the reservation, but there are different sorts of women's experience in Bihar. This paper contextualizes the experience of women of Panchayat election and their struggle for concerns of rural women. The women representative challenged the masculine politics and has faced challenge, violence and even murder.

There are many studies available on the women participation in the local government which used the qualitative and quantitative studies. The two kind of studies available that either use notion of —”proxy women” as an interpretation of elected women with only formal power or women as “first generation Learners.” First, women are rubber stamp or proxies who are used as tool or instrument of their husband or other male members of the family. Vyasulu & Vyasulu (1999) noted that grass roots democracy coming from top level which is guided by amendment to the constitution rather than mass movement. It is also true for the women reservation which is one-third seat reserved for women candidates in local government. She said “Women to become not aware that contested in large numbers to capture their rights through seats in these bodies. It happened because women as the group are not prepared for that development” (Vyasulu & Vyasulu, 1999, p. 3677).

Women faced societal pressure not to enter into political realm. The patriarchal concept about women suggests their real place within the home. It is strongly prevalent in larger level in rural India. The patriarchal role assigned for women, the dominant belief and assumption are that if women enter in the public domain outside from the home to participate in politics then it would mean that the men would have to attend to the household works. It is explicitly seen that unwillingness to alter the gender relations such as sexual division of labor that is appropriated by the patriarchal social intuitions of the family. However due to legal legislation towards women empowerment, the male authority also learned how to control the mobility of women candidates. Family authority allows women just as candidates, but the head of the family control on them. For example, Chathukulam and John (2000) conducted the study in Kottayam in the district of Kerala. In the course of the study women representative of Vaikom Panchayat shared the experience of the male domination in her life. “She did not have freedom to say in the affairs of the panchayat, and only she was used just as pawn in the political game” (Chathukulam & John, 2000, p. 80). The more complicated practice by the families allows women for just nomination of the candidature but they do not control on the decision making. The presence of strict social restrictions on the mobility of women and threatening makes it very difficult for women to challenge the male authority. “Sometimes a numbers of villages come under one Gram Panchayat in which condition women find it difficult to participate in the meetings because of that their restricted mobility compared to men” (Vyasulu & Vyasulu, 1999, p. 12). Women can

freely attend meetings if held inside of Panchayat office, but Gram Sabha meeting is mostly held outside or in open space that is mainly attended by the male.

Caste also plays an important role in local politics. If dalit women won the election the upper caste discriminates in the day to day life. The dalit women representative faced caste restrictions such as practicing the concept of “purity-pollution”. It creates hurdle and obstacle to political representation. Alsop (2001) noted that the woman from dalit community who was elected in the PRI was not permitted to sit inside the Panchayat office along with the upper caste members and she had no freedom of expression. Another case from Rajasthan, “during Panchayat meetings, lower caste women member sit on one side of the corner without contributing anything in the meeting” (Alsop et. al, 2001, p. 18). Thus, in the presence of strong prevalence of caste and gender-based hierarchy and discrimination, the question is how women effectively present in local political structure through Panchayati Raj. To sum up, women real role as the political representative is just rhetoric of affirmative action ensuring political empowerment of women. These studies are important for their significant contributions about women in panchayats but their approach overlooks some positive changes in women participation in local politics. These studies already set the parameter of the empowerment which they started searching in the rural area. As a result they examined on the basis of set goals about ideal women representatives and evaluated in term of success or failure of the women representative to achieve these goals.

However, the second view identifies that these women are “first generation learners” who gradually learn their political rights and will be slowly started to make a difference in local politics. There are also available studies that pointed out women in leadership position who gained new confidence and identity (Buch, 2006; Athreya & Rajeshevari, 1998). It is true that there are male pressures when women entered in the local election. Despite that women got the new sense of recognition, respect, and confidence in politics. Women tried to participate in local politics with all limitation and make small positive changes in society despite that they faced threatening, violence, and societal obstacle. The corrupt practice, violence, and societal barrier have created a serious challenge for women to enter into the politics. There are also various cases of positive changes like women struggle on various serious issues which became possible due to the implementation of the reservation system. Those women who belong to Scheduled caste or

schedule tribe, observed to bring about socioeconomic and political changes in the village through own representation. The basic argument is that the women members in the Panchayat system are “first generation learners” who gradually are learning politics and political system. In India, especially in rural areas feudal force and male domination are the deciding everything. In other words, our society is “Highly gendered-segregation” where quotas for women have “an additional relevance” (Hust, 2005, p. 17). There is the possibility for women in a village to approach women representative with their complaints and shares, discuss and find out solution of the own problems. It is also significant to note here that village women have now come out in public place finding a space for themselves and create space for own existence. Although, they not able to find out the solution of all such problem but in this process, they are now exposed to the understanding of the women oppression and new world for their freedom (Mathew and Baviskar, 2009). These concerns I have found with Kunti who served the ideal picture of representative and gives hope for intellectual exercise. It needs to be acknowledged that in the struggle in rural areas even for an inch, it is not an easy task for village women who participate in the local politics. The struggle for every inch contributed to the real political empowerment of women.

Panchayat: A platform for women empowerment

The male-centered/masculine politics cannot be reduced without institutional provision and political participation of women with political imagination. The 50% reservation seats for women in local bodies in 2006 of Bihar provide the new opportunity for women to enter in the public sphere as well as the political realm outside of the household. The result of election in 2006 was more than 54%. It is true in ground level that there is some change through direct representation of women in the political sphere and also in their life. The women leaders provides different picture that constructed her agency and creates possibilities to alter androcentric politics and bring women concern in the center of the circle of local politics. The women leader engaged in transforming relation of subordination has to face more specific challenge in the feudal authority. There is need to understand what kind of their engagement as the women representative in the local bodies and map their struggle.

Without political support and organizational setup women representative couldn't develop an effective leadership in Bihar. The women of south Bihar got various kind of support from All India Progressive Women's Association which was formed in 1994 and other social/peasant movement led by Communist Parties in the 1980s in Bihar. All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA) associated with the Communist Party of India (Marxism-Leninism) Liberation which believes in parliament democracy. All women leaders who fought as representatives in the panchayat election remembered those moments when AIPWA motivated and gave full support of them. AIPWA entered in PRI 2001 onwards with full strength after 50% women reservation. AIPWA wanted women to participate in local politics not only just fill the candidature form but engaged in order to campaigns, interaction with villagers. The women representatives were also to understand women's issues such as violence against women, rape, women education health and employment. During the Panchayat election women were seen in the discussion in the courtyard about politics which reduced distance between public and private. However, in an initial phase, women got uncomfortable, hesitated as to how to campaign for the candidates, how to deal with the senior male of the village, how to interact with the people like home to home. AIPWA played the important role to participate in panchayat election, to organize women and launched campaign for candidates. 1350 women candidates fought for Pradhan, sarpansh, panchayat samiti and Zila parishad who were activists of the AIPWA or APIWA supported independent women candidates. In this process, women tried to understand the political system that they got through Women's movement.

Kunti, belong to Bind caste from Jehanabad, known as women leader among the villagers. She was elected as member of Zila Parishad. She is an active member of AIPWA, well-respected women leader for her helpful nature and for the welfare of the panchayat. Not only she was active as elected member but she is always active to solve the problem of the people of all castes. Kunti said, "I was elected as women representative in 2001." She shared me her childhood experience as lower caste women. She said, "Caste discrimination and marginalization of our community push me to participate in the politics for transformation. When I went to cut grass in the landlord field, landlord used abusive language against women, threw their Khurpi and Khanchi (grub-ax and khanchi are made by the stick of bamboo in round shape). Rape is the everyday reality experience of lower caste women and exploiting their labor etc. was the

motivational issue for me. When peasant movement started in my area I joined the movement and also member of women organization such as AIPWA who actively involved in women's issues".

Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (1967) discussed representation of four types: substantive, descriptive, symbolic and authorized representation. The women representation in this paper would be looking at substantive and descriptive representation. The substantive representatives recognized constituent's interests. Second is the descriptive in which representative was standing with constituents because of significant shared characteristics. There is the assumption about representatives that they are linked with the people. They are better able to understand people concerns and transmit people interests into the political arena. Pitkin concept of representation can also find in the case of Kunti whose entry into peasant movement and also local bodies' election for the cause of people trusted on Kunti selected as own representative. Kunti as the member of Zila Parishad used 6 lakhs rupees from Zila Parishad fund to make irrigation pipeline from Ganeshbigha to Bhanwarbigha around 8 k.m. which was used for irrigation by the peasant from Jehanabad, Masudhi and Kako blocks. Kunti fulfilled not only good governance in her own time but also she exercised her authority beautifully; it is an "Instrument of power in which power is structured" (Schwartz, 1987, p. 62). Kunti used representative power to solve dispute of the people. I stayed in Kunti's home during the course of my field work and observed Kunti's engagement with the people. For instance, Kunti gets up early morning and would go somewhere. When her daughter-in-law wakes up, I asked her about Kunti. She said, "maybe she had gone to solve the conflict of the people". I asked to Kunti when she came back, what kind of problem? She said, two families, claimed their right on one tree and fighting with each other. One of them complained me last evening and requested to intervene. Kunti's daughter-in-law interrupted and told, "it happens daily, mummy visited nearby villages and came around mid-noon, Kunti smiled on her daughter in law and said, in the village people are fighting with each other, especially domestic/family disputes, over land and housing". She said, "I used to engage all the time and try to solve the problem."

Neelam is another woman representative from Sandesh block of Bhojpur and local women leader of the AIPWA. She said, "Liquor was very common problem among the women. I organized

meeting against alcohol, the license of which was issued by the government itself. Due to the condition of unemployment there was mushrooming liquor shop in almost every village. The male was purchasing liquor and engaged in violence against women. Many young women complained about domestic violence and eve-teasing. I decided protest against liquor Mafia and complained in the local administration. But local administration was not interested on it. After one incident again I organized meeting of women in the leadership of AIPWA and threatened the shop owner. But could not change anything and women continued to suffer such as wife beating, economic crisis. Another woman again complained to me after which we got together and decided to break the liquor shop. The women got angry and broke the shop. After that nearby villages no one dared to open the liquor shop”. But Neelam also drew attention on the limitation of women reservation. She believed that local bodies are instrument or platform to engage women for the social change. She emphasized that reservation alone are not adequate because women are constrained by a variety of social, cultural, economic, and political factors. For instance, if minimum wage and sexual oppression of women are continued in the field and family how can we imagine that women can achieve the goal of equality and empowerment. There is lack of proper education, lack of legal knowledge and inefficiency of the government. Thus, women cannot decide their own life what they want to do.

Women and panchayat: A beginning

Democracy is based on representation and establishes link between people and the government. The women of Bhojpur, Suman Devi cannot give the speech from the stage, but she can talk very well with the women moving in the streets of village. She said, “Earlier we could not sit on the cot in front of the upper caste, but today Dalit women have gained respect because of our struggle. To carry forward the struggle for the respect of our people we need to participate and control the panchayat election”. The 50% women reservation gave an opportunity to women who never entered outside of the household and don’t know anything about politics and political system. AIPWA push them and help to fight election without any hesitation. Asha Devi fought for chairperson from Dilia panchayat in Angiyanva, when she participated in the meeting for the first time, she used veil right from her home. She had hesitated, but after some time slowly her veil started sleeping down on her head when she involved listening to women’s issues and their spirit. She said, “Next time inform me about the meeting, I will come attend every meeting”.

Laxmi Devi, member of Zila Parishad from Tarari block, said, “we have tried to bring women from four walls through struggle and today upper caste women have also participated against us in the panchayat election. But these women did not participate in the campaign for themselves despite their men controlled their mobility”. Another example, Manju Devi chairperson from Fulari panchayat said, “I’m contesting because this is women reservation otherwise so far my husband had contested. If I am winning, I will take responsibility of myself. Yes I know I have small kids, but I will learn something new outside the household. First of all, I was not interested in contesting the election but when I broke the Laxman-rekha I decided to fully involve in the politics”. The women representatives provide us to consider their engagement in the local politics and political interests, knowledge and network and understanding towards women rights. They are not as proxy women.

The women struggle has been long in the south Bihar, especially Bhojpur and Jehanabad where women organized against the oppression of the feudal landlord. In this struggling, they gained confidence and challenge the patriarchal structure as well as feudal authority in the rural setup. They demanded dignity, minimum wage, women reservation and others. However, when they participated in the election and constructed space for their own existence they faced more brutal violence. Power can be exercised with threatening and violence. In the course of Panchayati election, presence of wide-scale violence, free and fair participation and performance of the women becomes very difficult. The concept of power is related to masculine ideology. There is need to reject male style politics which is based on the domination and violence. In order to understand it, for instance, Kunti narrated murder of Manju Devi. She said, “Manju had several identities such as the representative of Zila Parishad and local women leader of AIPWA. Manju Devi fought for Zila Parishad, and she was elected in undivided district of Jehanabad in 2001. When she was busy arranging for the conference on the labor issue, around 4 pm suddenly she was attacked and got killed by the armed men of Ranvir Sena⁴ in 2003 in Puran village (located in Jehanabad) because she was challenging the feudal authority. After the death of Manju thousands of people gathered and protested where they have demanded to arrest the armed men. This was also interfered by National Commission for Women where they have investigated and recommended for arrest of the culprits but the state government did not implement the recommendations of the commission.” These women are invisible from the study of scholars on

panchayat leaders who fought life and death in the rural area. However, Phillip recognized that “women as representatives were considered primarily responsible to put forth women’s interests in the policy-making process” (Phillips, 1995, p. 4). But in the case of Manju Devi who fought for economic concerns of women interest and labor issues, it was the Bihar government who tried to shield Ranvir Sena since 1995. In this context, it is very challenging and difficult for women to engage in local politics. It is the responsibility of the government to provide the safe political environment to women. Thus, we see that these women representative were able to fulfill the common interest of the women and also of people. It reveals a new kind of confidence and also able to think about shortcomings of the PRI.

Women representative have potential not only as agent but able to challenge male style of politics and also create space for women’s issue with political support. They have capacity to struggle for gender equality. But at the same time they felt difficulties in the atmosphere of violence. Kunti also felt threatened from liquor mafia and their political nexus with the states. The experience of Kunti, especially murder of Manju Davi raised question on the state. Finally, women representative of south Bihar shows that the women reservation can be an important impetus to women’s empowerment in India at the village level, but there are also many limitations to achieve women’s empowerment. The goal of women’s empowerment will not be accomplished by reservations alone. There is need to speed up this process such as introduction and implementation of some additional policies through which women can gain more confidence, build women’s capabilities and able to remove all operational obstacles and feel safe atmosphere.

¹ Seneca Fall Convention was first women rights convention on the role of women in the society and advocated civil rights especially women’s right to vote. The convention organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Quaker women in the New York in 1848. After this convention the women rights to vote was central question in the Unites States of women’s rights movement.

² Selected Speeches of women’s members of the Constituent Assembly, Published by Rajya Sabha. p. 67-68, Sources:
http://rajyasabha.nic.in/rsnew/publication_electronic/Selected%20Women%20Speech_Final.pdf

³ OBCs are not homogenous sociopolitical community. There are dominant and deprived castes among them.

⁴ Ranvir Sena, known as private caste militia was formed in 1994 in Bhojpur against peasant movement in Bihar.

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