

Role of PRIs in Economic Empowerment of Women Promoting Inclusive Growth

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Abstract :

The concept of Inclusive Growth is an important dimension of growth and development in a developing economy like India. Inclusive growth refers to growth including all the sections of the society, particularly who are most likely to be marginalized like poor people and women. Inclusive growth is the prerequisite of sustainable economic development. Its significance can easily be observed through the targets set for 11th and 12th five year plans in India. This article will deal with an important section of the society which is still to be taken into the mainstream of growth and development i.e. rural women. The government has made many laws to protect the right of a woman and proceed in the way of women empowerment. Women empowerment refers to a process of empowering women with all the denied aspects of life. As far as political participation is concerned, due to the reservation of one-third seats for women in all tiers of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), representation of women in the PRIs has increased to 46.7% as on 1st March 2013. At present women have been given 50 percent reservation in PRIs. Data reveal that the seats occupied by women at Panchayati Raj Institution are as per the allotment decided by the government. But in most of the cases these efforts prove to be useless as these women are posted at PRI level but they are not economically empowered. The article has been supported by the case studies, current scenario of women in PRIs and role of government in solving this problem.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Inclusive growth, status of women, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Reservation, stamp head and real head.

The concept of 'Inclusive Growth' is a wide concept that ensures equitable opportunities for various economic agents during the process of growth especially in a developing economy like India. This concept directly links between the macroeconomic and microeconomic determinants of the economy. The emergence of the concept of inclusive growth may be seen as relating to the realisation that growth processes may have different impacts not just across the distribution of income, but also among ethnic and gender groups and geographical regions. The concept also ensures that rather than outcomes being the only important aspect, whether the people are engaged in the growth process matters or not and if they are engaged then what is the degree of their involvement in such matters. Further, definition of inclusive growth involves four attributes:

1. **Opportunity:** Is the economy generating more and varied ways for people to earn a living and increase their incomes over time?
2. **Capability:** Is the economy providing the means for people to create or enhance their capabilities in order to exploit available opportunities?
3. **Access:** Is the economy providing the means to bring opportunities and capabilities together?
4. **Security:** Is the economy providing the means for people to protect themselves against a temporary or permanent loss of livelihood?

The economic growth has been the major driver of poverty reduction and inclusiveness in India. While positive distributional changes aided poverty reduction in rural areas, the worsening of distribution hampered poverty reduction in urban areas.

This paper deals with problem of inclusion of one of the marginalised groups in Indian society i.e. rural women. Despite progress, girls and women continue to be discriminated against in accessing education and within education systems. 57 million children worldwide, including 31 million girls, are out of school and two thirds of illiterate adults are women. In developing countries, adolescent girls are more likely to drop-out of secondary school than boys, particularly in rural areas.

The UN (2001) has defined women empowerment in terms of five components: “women’s sense of self-worth; their right to have and determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally”. While discussion about the rural women it must be quoted that the government has taken many efforts to bring these women into the mainstream of growth and development. One such effort is to give reservation to the women in PRIs so that they can also get a share in the growth and development of the economy. This has been provided to make them economically, socially and politically more empowered. Their inclusion in the growth of the economy is the need of the hour which can not be ignored.

Women as Marginalised Group

The act of perceiving that a particular individual of a group of individuals do not possess certain characteristics, qualities and traits that would make them equal to other people in the society is called Marginalization. Marginalised people do not enjoy the rights that the other people of the society enjoy. Such people suffer from discriminations and maltreatments inside and outside the homes. In Indian society, women form one such group that is marginalised. In most of the developing countries, women usually lose their lands when they are widowed. Even the rights for their own fathers are also not protected. In countries like Burundi, divorced women do not have right on the property that they shared with their husbands during their marriage. They do not even have rights to use that property. In these countries women have to seek the permission of their husbands before undertaking any judicious action. Most of the women in these countries are unaware of the new opportunities and reforms accorded to them.

Economic Empowerment of Women

By women’s economic empowerment, we mean the provision of equal opportunities to women in social services including their education and liberty, equal wages for equal work and the legal safeguards for them. The need of the hour is to aware the women about their potentials so that they can lead their own welfare.

The percentage of poor women is more than the poor men in almost all the countries. The responsibility of the family and society comes on the shoulders of women which results maximum hours for unpaid work. Most of the women do not have access to Microfinance services and they are not capable of taking their economic decisions. Economic empowerment of women basically includes their economics welfare. It provides them more employment opportunities. Economic empowerment is always dependent upon social and political empowerment.

Women’s Reservation in PRIs and Inclusive Growth

Women have been given a fair and commendable chance to ensure their position in the political scenario of the country by providing them the participation right in the PRIs by 73rd Amendment Act. The bill, Rajasthan Panchayati Raj (Second Amendment) Bill 2008, was passed in the State Assembly. The Government of Rajasthan has amended the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 and has made mandatory 50% reservation for women in election to Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan. These amendments have provided opportunities to the women to share the democracy along with their male counterparts. They have not got at least formal participation in political processes at grass root level of the country. Arora (2011) in her research article observed that the word 'participation' and 'real participation' are two different terms. The term 'participation' just expresses the quantitative aspect of empowerment but real participation is a wider aspect which includes qualitative aspect of empowerment, in addition to quantitative aspect. The qualitative aspect over the real participation of women in formation and active implementation of macro-economic policies and enhancing their socio economic development. It involves making the women capable to meet with negative social and economic impacts due to globalization, by reducing economic disparities. She found that participation of women in Panchayati Raj has increased undoubtedly.

Women in Progress

Chhavi Rajawat, the Sarpanch of Soda Village in Tonk district of Rajasthan in India, is the youngest sarpanch and the first woman sarpanch in India with MBA degree. It is the result of her constant and sincere efforts that Soda village has now tied up with German Software Vendor SAP to develop and internet and intranet portal, complete with technology education lab. Soda and SAP plan to link the portal with the state government website, making Soda the first fully computerized Panchayat in India. She has also launched a website www.soda-india.in. She presented India in 11th Info Poverty World Conference held at the UN. It shows that the women have been politically empowered through the reservation given to them in PRIs.

Thus we can say that educated women Sarpanches can bring a tremendous change in the society. But, the recent studies show that more than half of the elected women are unaware of their reservation in PRIs despite the fact that they have got elected because of this very provision. More than half of them do not know about the taxes imposed on them by the PRIs and most of them are not aware about the new schemes implemented by the Panchayat. Moreover, the quota for women in PRI does not lead empowerment in each case of women. Sometimes women work as mere 'proxies' but it varies according to the area and the situation. It leads to economic empowerment of women when women representatives in some cases are bolder and gender sensitive than their male counterparts. In many cases, two heads are functioning at Gram Panchayat level, one is she head, the elected woman sarpanch and other is he head, the real male sarpanch. Most of the she heads are considered merely as "Rubber Stamps" as the functions of Panchayats are being performed by the male members of their families. It is usually observed that the female sarpanches are dependent on their husbands even at the working place as they don't feel themselves strong enough to answer the harassment from their male colleagues. The situation becomes more pitiable when these elected females put their signature on the cheques and documents related to Panchayats activities, without reading them just because the Pati Sarpanch has asked them to do so. It is still doubtful that increasing number of reserved seats for women will lead to the real participation of the women thus leading to their economic empowerment. In most of the cases, reservations of women have been proved a failure due to misuse and manipulations by the local power brokers.

Obstacles observed

There are many hindrances in the way of economic empowerment of these elected women. Firstly, their non political background does not enable them to take any decision, so they need help of the male members of their families who further become the real head of the particular position. Then, most of the women are illiterate and dependent on their male folk to conduct the activities of Panchayats and protect them from any sexual harassment. So they can not even imagine their economic freedom. Many female members of Panchayati Raj accept that they were pushed by their husbands to take part in PRI election. They need guidance of their husbands before signing any cheque or any other important Panchayat documents. They conduct panchayat activities according to their husbands and thus these real heads become dominant over the elected females even in economic matters. Then there are some traditional barriers related to the supremacy of the male members in taking any decisions in important issues. This tradition somewhere compels these elected women to seek suggestions from their husbands. The other reason is the faulty vigilance of government and lack proper governmental efforts to check the interference of males in the activities of Panchayat which should be performed directly by the female Sarpanches on the basis of their own discretion.

Thus, despite of all the efforts put on by the government, certain issues still remain in the rural areas of the country.

Policy Recommendations

- An important requirement for bringing about empowerment of rural women through PRIs is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and bearing children needs to be replaced by a feeling of equal partnership of women and men. To inculcate this, they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both.
- There should be an interaction between the women in PRIs and the enlightened rural women. The elected women should be given the chance to interact with the educated urban elected women representatives.
- There should be increased emphasis on ensuring the participation of women in the meetings of Panchayats at all the levels. This is needed to promote and enhance their leadership qualities and self confidence. It will help them to perform better in the Panchayats to ensure their participation in the meetings. Attendance of all women must be made compulsory from Gram Panchayats to Zila Parishad.
- The women should be encouraged to organize themselves. It can be effectively used as instruments to mobilize women of the village.
- Some successful women's organizations can also act as catalytic agents for encouraging women's participation in social and political activities.
- The government should provide financial support and infrastructure to some of the successful women organization to take up the responsibility of encouraging the elected women representatives. This task could also be taken up by the leaders of women's movement in the State. They can also provide support to sensitize the rural women.
- The genuine NGOs must be identifies for giving them the tasks of training, encouraging, organizing, emblazing and guiding the elected women representatives.

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