CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

In this age of participatory strategies and women’s empowerment, the importance of women’s participation in any public endeavour cannot be over-emphasized. No country can progress if one half of the population is relegated to a residuary and subsidiary status in participation. The subordinate status and the low level of literacy, skills and income earning capabilities of women in society seriously hampers the overall economic growth and progress of mankind. Denial of equal participation, access and control of productive resources to women has rendered women unequal partners in the developmental process. Despite the enactment of several socio-economic legislations and the Indian Constitution declaring gender equality, the patriarchal values and the normative structure established in society have hindered women’s participation and emancipation. It has now become clear that, for sustainable socioeconomic development, in any society, people’s participation is essential. At the same time it is not possible to assume that all sections of the population take part in the development process. In particular, women find themselves in a disadvantaged position and thereby face multiple hurdles in their quest for equal partnership.
Background Information

In India, since independence, the issue of decentralization of planning has been the focus of the government’s policy concerns. Several Committees and Commissions have deliberated on the issue and made policy recommendations. Notable among them are the Planning Commission’s Guidelines on District Planning (1968), the Dantawala Committee Report on Block Level Planning (1978), and the Hanumanta Rao Report on District Planning (1984). The Ashok Mehta Committee (1977) recommended decentralization of powers first to the District Council (Zilla Parishad) and then to the Mandal Panchayat consisting of a group of villages within a Block that would be the democratically elected body at the lowest level, leaving aside the village committees (Grama Panchayat). The G.V.K Rao Report (1985) and the L.M. Sanhavi Report (1986) on Panchayat Raj System were widely debated upon and the debates culminated in the passing of the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution. These amendments led to the setting up of a decentralized democratic local self-government system in the country. Guided by the recommendations of these Committees and the occasional policy guidelines issued by the Planning Commission, most of the state governments initiated experiments in decentralized planning in India.
Gujrat, Rajasthan, Karnataka, West Bengal and Maharashtra were the forerunners of decentralized planning. None of the states which have been experimenting with different models of decentralized planning under serious constraints imposed by diverse social and political conditions have attempted to implement a truly democratic form of decentralized economic planning by empowering the people at the grassroots to formulate and implement their own development plans and the state government remains the custodian of funds, playing the role of facilitator for decentralized planning by providing the local level agencies with financial support. All these decentralization ventures have been more demonstrative than democratic\(^2\)

Genuine democratic decentralization of economic planning in the country, an ideal goal repeatedly emphasized in all the Five Year Plans for the past five decades and more, has formed the subject of widespread debates and discussions in the country. Three main reasons for the slow progress in this direction, emerging from these debates, have found general acceptance:

1. Lack of will on the part of the political leadership because of its fear that decentralization of political authority to lower levels may lead to the emergence of a new line of political leadership at the local level, particularly in rural areas, causing erosion of its authority and support among the people;
2. Resistance from higher-end bureaucracy which does not relish the idea of losing its power and authority to lower level functionaries; and,

3. Absence of a viable institutional setup at the local level (prior to the Panchayati Raj Act of 1994) capable of formulating and implementing local level plans, which, in fact, is a corollary of the first two reasons.³

The Panchayati Raj system has been revamped keeping in view the following objectives⁴

* Ensuring people’s participation in local level administration,
* Designing innovative plans for people’s involvement in village development,
* Inculcating responsibility among people for all developmental activities in the village,
* Ensuring that people benefit from development schemes and programmes.

According to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, a Gram Sabha has also to be constituted. The Gram Sabha has a dual role: as a watchdog of the working of the Gram panchayat and as a group assisting the Panchayat in matters in which public involvement and participation are necessary.
The functions of the Gram Sabha can be listed as:

- Mobilising people's participation and involvement, through contribution in cash, kind or voluntary work in the programmes for economic development and social justice;
- Promotion of harmony among all sections of the people;
- Assisting the Panchayat in finalising the beneficiaries under anti-poverty programmes, including land reforms;
- Generally assessing, from time to time, the working of the Panchayat and providing guidelines for such working, in accordance with law; and,
- Suggesting, for the consideration of the Panchayat, from time to time, the nature of programmes and activities to be undertaken in the Panchayat.

The 73rd Constitutional amendment has provided avenues for facilitating social mobilization at the grassroots through: a) activating the Gram Sabha, which will provide a forum for open discussions on different village level projects, thereby ensuring social acceptance for these projects on the one hand and participation of people on the other; b) ensuring the representation of the weaker sections, viz., people belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes in the decision-making process; and, c) empowering rural women members in Panchayati Raj bodies. The participation of the weaker sections and women
members in the Panchayati Raj bodies will enable them to ensure that only such projects/activities are taken up which will meet their felt needs and benefit people who have not been able to enjoy the advantages of the system as yet.

Thus, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution have provided a significant impetus to the much-wanted women’s participation in public life. As a result of this, over nine lakhs of women have got representation in grassroot level governing bodies all over the country. Even though women are perceived to be change agents, their participation in development planning and decision-making in the higher echelons of power are yet to be accepted by the ruling elites, generally men. At the same time it should not create an impression that the presence of women in grassroot level bodies is per se an indication of their empowerment. Instead it should be perceived in the light of the mandatory provision in the Constitution, which forces political parties to accommodate women. Even in the Amendment Act women are not given due importance as is revealed by the way in which women’s reservation has been presented. There is no evidence in the Act to the effect that women are to be considered partners in governance. This ill-conceived perception and lack of vision on women’s role as equal partners is the main reason for the lopsided development of the country.
However, India is one of the first countries to enact legislation to create opportunities for women’s political participation at the grassroots. At the national level, more than a third of these women are chairpersons of Panchayats at different levels. But, at the same time, there are certain surprising variations across states. For instance, West Bengal doesn’t have a single woman as Chairperson of Zilla Parishad (District Panchayat) and it has a low proportion of women Chairpersons at other levels as well.

There have been several studies and assessments of the impact of women’s entry into the Panchayat. The results seem mixed. A number of factors continue to constrain women’s participation in Panchayati Raj.

* “No confidence” motion is being used to overthrow women Chairpersons who assert their control over Panchayats. The Vice-Chairperson, who is invariably a man, then takes over the chair.
* Women members are vulnerable to violence, which is used as a means to restrict their participation.
* Lack of political experience and public skills has fettered women’s potential.
* Women have to constantly struggle against attempts at co-option by powerful men.
* Women’s participation is hampered by their dependence on their wages, and the fact that they have to carry the burden of household work and survival tasks.
Statement of the Problem

In almost all plans of poverty alleviation and social change women in general become the target for development activities rather than a group to be co-opted as active participants. Women, especially rural poor and illiterate women, never get recognition/role as agents of change. However, women’s participation is now recognised universally as a crucial element in maximising the effectiveness of any plan for socio-economic progress. In India, the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution was itself based on an admission of the importance of women’s participation at the village level in community decision-making process.

Though nearly one million women could occupy different posts in local level administrative structures, a broad based participation of women is severely restricted due to a nexus of traditional factors that ensure the domination of Indian politics by consideration of caste, class, religion, feudal and family status etc., which are essentially parochial and work in favor of men against women. Due to the interplay of all these factors women are still left on the periphery of the development process and their participation remains elusive in spite of their casting votes and contesting elections and also capturing some seats of power and influence. Inequality and gender based discrimination still constrain women from participating in activities outside the home.
The present study has been conducted to find out how far women are able to participate in planning and development at the grassroots and what hurdles they face in their participation both as common people under the Panchayat and as elected representatives. After analysing the problems, the study is intended to provide suggestions for enhancing women’s participation.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the socio-economic background of the respondents at the grassroots level.
2. To assess the participation of common women and women Panchayat members in the grassroots level development.
3. To identify various pressures inhibiting the participation of women in grassroots level development.
4. To suggest measures for enhancing active participation of women at the grassroots level.

Hypotheses

1. The lower the level of the education of women the lesser their participation in socio-economic and political activities.
2. The more women are economically dependent the lesser will be their participation.
3. Low level or lack of knowledge of the functioning of the Panchayat and of their rights and responsibilities leads to a low level of participation.

4. Restrictions on mobility and time constraints due to the traditional role played by women may restrict their active participation.

5. The inherent gender bias that exists in society inhibits women’s participation.

Justification of the Study

Women’s struggle today covers a wide range of issues. Women’s participation in the development process is not only central to the functioning and strengthening of democracy but equally crucial to their struggle against oppression. A change in power structures and gender relations is to be central to the strategy of the development process. However, many obstacles inherent in the social structure itself plague women’s participation in the development process. Patriarchal control in all aspects of life severely limits the potential and scope of women’s actual participation in activities outside the home.

Women’s participation in the development process is constrained by various pressures. Even if Constitutional protection is granted for women at the grassroots, the scenario is not healthy. The social conditions necessary for sharing power are yet to be created by liberating women from patriarchal, functional, educational and social taboos. The Panchayati Raj
system, though it has opened vistas for participatory development, in its process, in every phase women face many obstacles that work against their role as equal partners.

In determining every social position there are forces that act from all sides. In the struggle for equal rights and power—in determining that position—each woman has to survive and safeguard herself against many forces that work against her legitimate position in society. Identifying those forces is the major objective of this study and Kerala has been selected.

Kerala is one of the highly literate states of India, with high profile social indices favoring women. Indicators such as the highest rate of female literacy, a high level of female education and employment, the lowest number of households below poverty line, the highest level of human development, low MMR and IMR, high life expectancy etc. place the state in an elevated position in the social map of India. While women indeed have achieved almost universal literacy in Kerala and are very active in the labor force, their political presence in the legislative bodies is remarkably low. This difference, by itself, should give pause to arguments that seek to link women’s education and employment to a place in public political life axiomatically.
The study being earned out against a socio-political background, the economic connotations cannot be sidelined, since a clear-cut compartmentalization is not possible. Hence, the study is pursued in the interdisciplinary domain by merging the socio-economic and political aspects of the problem.

Scope of the Study

Women’s participation and empowerment in India is gaining momentum especially after the enactment of the New Panchayati Raj Act. Though women’s involvement has been visible in mass movements, group upsurges and protest struggles, their presence is not felt in structured decision-making institutional settings. Even in the structures wherein women’s participation is substantially needed, they are not given positions of power.

The participation of women in decision-making is the criterion for evaluating the extent of empowerment of women in a developing society. If half of the population remains sidelined and does not participate in decision-making, the goal of democracy and the avowed modality of people’s participation get truncated. So the participation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions, which are regarded as the most important instillments for realizing the goals of economic betterment and social justice, is essential. An attempt is being made to study the hurdles encountered by women at the grass root level governing bodies.
The marginalized position that women hold in every walks of life is the manifestation of their relegated status in society. No matter what is their age, education, position or even power and authority, women in real life do not enjoy equal status with men. The major constraints that make women ‘lesser sex’ is not anything but sheer discrimination if not deliberate marginalization.

It is also to be noted that the exact problems that women face at grassroots level had not attracted much attention of the political scientists. It remains unexplored as a subject of academic investigation. Taking in view of the relevance of 73rd Amendment, an investigation in to the working of these institutions and to throw light on the extent of women’s role is felt very much necessary.

Thus a thorough probe into the problems with special reference to women and solving them through active planning strategy is the need of the day. The study intends to focus on various aspects of women’s participation at the grassroots and its scope leads to further probing.

Operational Definitions

Panchayati Raj: Refers to the three-tier structure under decentralised planning of India consisting of District, Block and Village Panchayat (Gram Panchayat). For the present study the village Panchayat is considered.
Grassroot level Development: The developmental and administrative activities of the Grama Panchayat where popular initiative is visualised for development.

Participation: In this study the term participation means the involvement of an individual in effecting change through his or her active presence by way of discussing problems, suggesting measures and taking part in decision making process.

Respondents: In this study there are two categories of respondents. The first category constitutes the common women of the Panchayat and the second women Panchayat members.

Common women: It refers to the female population in a Panchayat sampled from the Neighborhood Groups (NHG) functioning in the Panchayat.

Woman Panchayat member: Elected woman representative of a Ward of Grama Panchayat (each Panchayat is divided in to wards. From each ward one member is elected)

Pressure: Pressures are those difficulties, hindrances or mental constraints that emerge out of the presence of certain conditions or nonobservance of certain norms that restrict an individual from active participation.
Organization of the Thesis

- Chapter I deals with background information, statement of the problem, objectives and hypotheses of the study. Justification of the study, scope, operational definitions and finally the organization of the thesis are also included in this chapter.

- Chapter II reviews the related literature on women’s participation in various fields such as agriculture, industry and local self-governments at the grassroot level.

- Chapter III presents the methodology of the study.

- Chapter IV consisting of three sections deal with analysis and discussion. The first section deals with socio economic background of the respondents. In the second and third section, the participation of both the categories of respondents were analysed one by one.

- Chapter V includes three sections. The first section discusses and deals with the identified problem and tests the significance by comparing both the groups of respondents. The second and third section present relevant case studies and major suggestions respectively.

- Chapter VI summarises major findings and suggestions of the study.
References


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.
