

Rural Local Self Government and Empowerment of Women - A Case Study of Hanumangarh District of Rajasthan

Abstract

This article is a case study. It focuses on the empowerment of women through the rural local self government (RLSG) in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan. It is an outcome of my ongoing CRO UGC Project "Rural Local Self Government and Empowerment of Women in South Asia 1995-2015.

Keywords: Rural Local Self Government (RLSG), Empowerment, Disadvantaged Sections, Gram Panchayat (GP) Panchayat Samiti (PS), Zila Parishad (ZP).

Introduction

Rajasthan, one of the state of Indian Union is the sample state of this study. It has an important place in the history of rural local self government (RLSG) in the county. It was at Nagaur, a district of this state that the late Jawaharlal Nehru, inaugurated the RLSG on 2nd October 1959 and hailed it as 'the most revolutionary and historic step in the context of new India.' However, RLSG in the state after this impressive start stagnated over long period and testified to the lack of commitment to democratic principles of the political leadership, which had at various stages and in varying degrees, contributed to their decline. The state leadership's failure to hold elections to the RLSG bodies regularly and its propensity for superseding them for political reasons reduced these bodies to a mere caricature of democracy. However, the state of Rajasthan in the wake of the 73rd amendment has ushered in the new RLSG by enacting the Rajasthan Panchayat Raj Act and three-tier structure of the system has been established and functioning after the 1995 RLSG elections. The sample district of this study is Hanumangarh district of the state.

Aim of the Study

1. To assess and evaluate the levels of elected women representative's participation in the rural local self government in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan.
2. How women are taking part in the rural local self government's decision making process?
3. Has there been a process of personal empowerment experienced by the elected women representatives? If so, how has this manifested and made a substantial difference in their lives?

This article is based on the primary data collected from the field study for the project. Language has always been an important factor in every kind of research work which involves interaction with the respondents. Documenting of profiles for elected representatives could only be possible through first hand interviews with them. Keeping in mind the language's constraint and the interview method of primary data collection, the choice of the district to be covered under the present project has to be limited to the Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan only. A critical evaluation of rural local self government (RLSG) and its impact on women can be examined by structural & functional aspects of RLSG operational point of view in developing countries with specific reference to Hanumangarh district in Rajasthan from the period 1995-2015. It can be noticed that a lot of changes have taken place, but the focus point in which reservations has been provided to the local self government by the government of Rajasthan is a point of major concern.

As stated earlier, the new RLSG in accordance with the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 has been functioning since



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1995 in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan. This project examined and evaluated the performances of the new RLSG by conducting of field investigations and survey in the Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan in order to get a clear picture by the proper analysis work. There are seven developmental Block under Panchayat Samiti (PS) in the district and this project covers all the Blocks (i) Hanumangarh, (ii) Pilibanga, (iii) Sangaria, (iv) Tibbi, (v) Rawatsar, (vi) Nohar and (vii) Bhadra. Hanumangarh district is one of the developing district of Rajasthan. So the implementation of new RLSG in the district is not only a big challenge to leadership but also it is worth while of investigation. Another reason for the selection of this district is the fact that it is well connected with my posting place Nohar. As a result the necessary visits to the field study could easily be arranged as well as managed.

Methodology and Data Collection

This project is based on primary and secondary data. The researcher adopted and applied the social survey research method, case study method and statistical method (only tabular) to generate primary data for project. The sources of primary data includes (i) field investigation through administration of questionnaires (ii) interview with some important leaders and officials (iii) attending of meetings of some village panchayats, Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishad and meetings of key functionaries of the district administration (iv) use of acts and government reports etc. After the completion of the above a questionnaire was finalised to carry out the research for this project. This step involved three stages: -

1. Preparing the questionnaires;
2. Testing the questionnaires through a pilot study; and
3. Finalising the questionnaires.

In its final form the questionnaire comprised of some sections. These sections aimed to collect general information on the respondents and their family information regarding their political background of the respondents, information throwing light on the respondents' way to panchayat politics; information on the knowledge and awareness of the respondents i.e. knowledge about the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act, functions allotted to the RLSG, understanding of one's role as an elected women representative, awareness about reservation for women, information regarding the experiences of working under RLSG including the perception of the respondents on the certain issues concerning them as elected women representatives.

As it has been pointed out, a pilot study was carried out primarily to test the administration of their preliminary questionnaire. This project led to some changes in the final

questionnaire, but the changes were only in terms of shifting the order of some questions and not in the contents.

The secondary data has collected from the relevant books, journals, articles, Internet and newspaper reports.

Collection of field data is necessary to draw a definite conclusion, regarding empowerment of women at the district level in Rajasthan, the researcher undertook a field investigation work during April 2017- Dec. 2018 followed by several numbers of trips to the district through out the year. After the investigation, the researcher has collected data on the RLSG leaders at the all the three levels, GP, PS and ZP. In order to get first hand knowledge regarding the functions of RLSG, the concerned researcher attended several formal meetings of GP and of few PS and have made frequent visit to Panchayat Secretaries (Sachiv), extension officers and Development Officers (Vikas adhikari) of PS, Chief Executive officer of ZP and other officers of district administration. Certain documentary details and other relevant information gathered from these administrative officials which have provided helping hands for the collection of the primary data for this research work. While examining the rural self government by the broad parameters of historical contexts; the period of study which has been taken from 1995 to 2015 has got its relevance.

Size of the Sample

Initially there was a plan to cover all the RLSG leaders, ward members and sarpanchs of GP, Pradhans and other members of the PS and ZP. But such type of work requires a large number of researchers. However, in view of the practical difficulties and non feasibility in covering the entire district with all its RLSG leaders, it has been decided to include only three types of RLSG leaders viz. the sarpanchs, the Pradhans and the other members of ZP for the interview. Thus, the study consists of 245 respondents classified into three groups of respondents.

These are:

1. Sarpanchas (GP) Pradhans and members of PS, Zila Pramukh and others members of ZP
2. Administrative Officials
3. Influential Persons

These respondents are further categorised as:

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| (i) Political Leaders (RLSG leaders) | |
| Gram Panchayat level | =120 |
| Panchayat Samiti level | = 30 |
| Zila Parishad | = 15 |
| Total | =165 |
| (ii) Administrative Officials (RLSG level) | |
| Gram Panchayat level | =20 |
| Panchayat Samiti level | = 20 |
| Total | = 40 |
| (iii) Influential Persons | = 40 |
| Total | = 40 |
| Grand total | = 165+ 40+ 40= 245 |

Table 1
Size of the sample expressed in the figure in the parenthesis by percentage

S. No.	Level	RLSG Leaders, 165	Administrative Officials, 40	Influential Persons, 40	Total
1	GP	120	20	20	160 (65.30)
2	PS	30	20	20	70 (28.57)
3	ZP	15	-	-	15 (6.12)
Total		165(67.34)	40(16.32)	40(16.32)	245(100)

(Source: Data collected from the field study) (Note: Figures in the parenthesis are the percentage)

In order to make the sample a representative of the study, three categories of representation have been taken into consideration

Participation and Empowerment of Women

Empowerment through political participation has brought women to the mainstreams in order to develop and enable themselves to take part in decision making process for the society. In India, Backward classes like SCs, STs, OBCs and women have always been marginalised in the society since a long period of time. After independence, Constitution has provided rule for their empowerment. The rural local self government is one basic fundamental principle of Indian system adopted in 1959 after the recommendation of Mehta Commission. The rural local government system has already been present in the old form of Indian society, nevertheless, it was dominated

and regulated by only few people of the society and the role of the lower class sections of the society was being restricted (Mathew 1997).

The rural local self government primarily aims to ensure people's participation in the governance of the country and emphasises the need of women's participation in it. Women's participation in rural local self government is essential as it will help to empower them and build up their competence so that they may be able to influence and work like pressure groups for the development and in the decision-making process independently at the grass roots level. It is an established fact that provisions of reservation has helped them to acquire political positions in the rural local self government institutions, but mere acquisition of positions does not imply the effectiveness of participation. Therefore, an attempt has been made in this project to assess and evaluate the levels of their participation in the institutions in the Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan.

Table 2 Leaders' Perception on the Nature of Participation of Women Representatives in RLSG

RLSG	Perceptions					Total
	Participating actively	Not Participating	Not Involved actively	Not Competent	Don't know	
Gram Panchayat	44 (36.66)	36 (30.00)	8 (6.66)	28 (23.33)	4 (3.33)	120 (100)
Panchayat Samiti	23(76.66)	4(13.33)	-	3(10.00)	-	30(100)
Zila Parishad	8(53.33)	5(33.33)	-	2(13.33)	-	15(100)
Total	75(46.18)	45(27.27)	8(4.84)	33(20.0)	4(1.9)	165(10)

(Source: Data collected from the field study) (Note: Figures in the parenthesis are the percentage)

The data shows that 46.18 per cent leaders are participating actively in the functioning, while 27.27 per cent leaders have stated that women representatives are not participating actively and independently, while 20 per cent have feel that they are not competent enough to share powers and are unable discharge their responsibilities in RLSG. Only 4.84 per cent leaders are of the view that the women representatives are not taking part actively in the functioning. It indicates that GP level leaders have

considered that the women representatives are incompetent and unable to perform their duties and responsibilities. It is due to their illiteracy, ignorance, patriarchal family set up and socio-cultural values prevailing in the rural societies. However, the higher-level rural leaders have admitted that women should be provided adequate opportunities to show their performance in RLSG.

Table 3. Elected Leaders' Perception Regarding Reservation in RLSG

RLSG	Responses			Total
	Yes	No	Don't know	
Gram Panchayat	66(55.00)	26(21.66)	28(23.33)	120(100)
Panchayat Samiti	15(50.00)	15(50.00)	-	30(100)
Zila Parishad	13(86.66)	2(13.33)	-	15(100)
Total	94(56.96)	43(26.06)	28(16.96)	165(100)

(Source: Data collected from the field study) (Note: Figures in the parenthesis are the percentage)

The data in the table shows that majority (56.96 per cent) of elected leaders are in favour of reservation in RLSG. It indicates that the disadvantaged sections are competent enough to take

the role for as people's representatives in these institutions and have favoured them to provide this opportunity to them. However, 26.06 percent elected leaders have opposed the reservation on various

reasons and 16.96 per cent respondents have no idea about it.

Table 4 Responses of Leaders Regarding Extent of Equality of Women With Men in Matter of Their Role Performance

RLSG	The extent of equality				Total
	To a Great extent	To some extent	Not at all	Don't know	
Gram Panchayat	-	36(30.00)	80(66.66)	4(3.33)	120(100)
Panchayat Samiti	2(6.66)	14(46.66)	14(46.66)	-	30(100)
Zila Parishad	1(6.66)	11(73.33)	3(20.00)	-	15(100)
Total	3(1.81)	61(36.96)	97(58.78)	4(1.90)	165(100)

(Source: Data collected from the field study) (Note: Figures in the parenthesis are the percentage)

The data shows that majority of the respondents (58.78 per cent) are the view of that performances of women are not equal to their male counterparts. However, this trend is showing variations at three different levels. Majority of leaders at GP level (66.66 per cent) significant number of leaders at PS level (46.66 per cent) and a sizeable number at ZP level (20 per cent) have expressed the same opinion. However, 38.77 per cent total respondents have admitted that the role and performances of women representatives are equal to their male leaders in RLSG. Out of these, 36.96 per cent of the respondents have stated that women leaders are performing the role at par with the male but to certain extent. While only 1.81 per cent respondents have stated that their role and performances are equal with the male to a great extent. The trends in the data shows that about 80 per cent leaders at ZP level, 53.32 per cent at PS level and 30 per cent at GP level are of the opinion that women leaders can play equal role with their male leaders in RLSG. These respondents include women

leaders at all levels of panchayats. Women chairperson of a sampled panchayat samiti has stated that women are not getting equal opportunities in the affairs of the family and the society. Due to the absence of social recognition how women can be expected to play equal role in panchayats? Women in the villages are expected to be in *pardah* (veil) and they are required not to enter the *chaupals* because it is always regarded against the *maryada* (culture) of a woman in the traditional rural society (Singh 2005). It indicates that the performances of women leaders are not satisfactory, as they cannot perform any role in reality in Gram Panchayats. However, their role and performance at PS and ZP levels are equal to their male counterparts, which is due to the reservation provided for women in RLSG.

It has usually been alleged that their family members in RLSG institutions represent women leaders. The opinion of elected representatives were ascertained and are presented in table no 6 given below:

Table5 Responses of Leaders Regarding Extent of Proxy Representation of Women Leaders in RLSG

RLSG	The extent of equality				Total
	To a Great extent	To some extent	Not at all	Don't know	
Gram Panchayat	46 (38.33)	46 (38.33)	26 (21.66)	2 (1.66)	120 (100)
Panchayat Samiti	6 (20.00)	19 (63.33)	5 (16.66)	-	30 (100)
Zila Parishad	3 (20.00)	3 (20.00)	9 (60.00)	-	15 (100)
Total	55 (33.33)	68 (41.21)	40 (24.24)	2 (1.21)	165 (100)

(Source: Data collected from the field study) (Note: Figures in the parenthesis are the percentage)

The data shows that an absolute majority (74.54 per cent) of the respondents have given their opinion that women leaders are being represented in proxy. Out of these respondents, 33.33 per cent have admitted this practice have played to a great extent, while 41.21 per cent have stated that it is up to certain extent. However, 22.24 per cent respondents have disagreed with the view of proxy representation and these respondents may include women leaders at all levels of panchayats. The trend in the data indicates that a significant number (40 per cent) of the respondents at ZP level, an overwhelming majority (83.33 per cent) at PS level and absolute majority (76.66 per cent) at GP level have admitted the practice of proxy representations in RLSG are there.

It is observed during field surveys that their male family members, i.e., husband or sons represent on behalf of most of the women leaders in GPs. The women leaders do not attend meetings in real sense, but their signatures or thump impression are being taken after the proceedings of meetings get over. It also applies in the case of women chairpersons at GPs level where their wards perform actual functioning because they are illiterate and ignorant about their political activities. However, women leaders at PS and ZP levels attend the meetings because they are literate and aware about their duties, role and performances.

The table 6 presents the responses of sampled leaders regarding the extent of interaction of

women representatives with RLSG officials.

Table 6
Responses of Leaders Regarding the Extent of Effective Interactions of Women Representatives with the Officials

RLSG	The extend of interactions				Total
	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all	Don't know	
Gram Panchayat	-	48 (40.00)	62 (51.66)	10 (8.33)	120 (100)
Panchayat Samiti	4 (13.33)	23 (76.66)	3 (10.00)	-	30 (100)
Zila Parishad	5 (33.33)	5 (33.33)	4 (26.66)	1 (6.66)	15 (100)
Total	9 (5.45)	76 (46.06)	69 (41.81)	11 (6.66)	165 (100)

(Source: Data collected from the field study) (Note: Figures in the parenthesis are the percentage)

The data shows that only 5.45 percent of the respondents are of the view that women can interact to a great extent with the officials in an effective manner. A sizeable number (41.81 per cent) of the respondents have considered that women cannot interact with the officials in any way. Almost half of the respondents (46.06 per cent) have expressed the view that women do interact but to certain extent only. It means that the effectiveness of interactions by the women with officials are minimum at GP level and more at PS and ZP levels. It indicates that women representatives at PS and ZP levels are more educated, competent and independent in comparison to the women representatives at GP level.

Thus a large number of women have contested in the last RLSG elections and in some cases, they have succeeded in the general seats also. It is only attributed to the new Panchayati Raj Act and their capacity to win. The reservation system for women in RLSG institutions have not only provided them an opportunity but also have encouraged to attend the meetings of these institutions and influenced the process in decision-making process (Lal 2005). However, this type of political empowerment is insignificant at GP level but it is satisfactory at PS and ZP levels. Moreover, it is the beginning of the process and is certainly going to help to empower women in future (Hooja and Hooja 1998).

Thus, The Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 has increased the proportion of women representatives in RLSG institutions of the state. However this opportunity has not been availed by them in real sense and their political mobilisation and active participation in RLSG, particularly at GP level is not of the desirable standard (Arya 2003). It does not mean that the Act has any weakness in this regard. In real sense, it is because of their social and economic backwardness. Therefore, social and economic factors are being required for the political empowerment of women in the rural society (Kumar 1999).

Rural Local Self Government in Hanumangarh District – Major findings

In the light of 73rd constitutional amendment, 1993 which provides for them much needed constitutional sanctity (a new life) and vitality to the

RLSG in term of devolution of political administration and financial powers to the grass roots level government in the country, in this section, the scholar to examine and evaluate the empowerment of women in the Hanumangarh district. The major findings are as follows-

Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act provides for reservation of seats for SCs/STs in proportion to their population, 21 for OBCs, here total reservation for SC/ST does not exceed 50 per cent and 50 percent for women.

The project reveals that women have definitely come to power through this provision, but they can play their expected roles only after proper training, experience and education. Illiterate chairpersons have to depend on their secretaries whereas women sarpanch and pradhans in some of the cases take assistance of their husband and relatives.

One of the most striking aspects of RLSG elections is that there is qualitative difference in the meaning of the vote when it comes to federal and state elections, versus voting for panchayats. While, federal/state elections are extremely well organised, village level politics are inherently problematic. In fact, some of the historical electoral malpractices especially the use of violence and the stuffing of ballot boxes, which are said to be diminishing, are making their presence felt in village level elections. It is at this level that we see informal institutional practices reinforcing the structural biases against women candidates.

The most crucial obstacle in the way of real political empowerment of women through RLSG occurs at the stage of the filing of the nomination for candidature itself. Most women file their candidature for elections to RLSG institutions not out of their own will, but due to the pressure of husbands, sons or other male member of the family or the village or due to the pressure of some political party. This phenomenon is even more apparent in case of women belonging to SC or ST. In order to fulfill the reserved quota, the political workers have to deploy various strategies to convince the women and one of the most adopted strategies is to influence the women

through the family members. Zenab Banu (2001) argues that it is extremely difficult to make tribal women stand for Panchayat elections as they consider panchayats as bad and full of quarrels

Corruption in RLSG elections (Chauhan 2003) is also responsible making the participation of women in the process a mere tokenism since due to the constraints of village societal norms, indulgence in such practices fall strictly within the male domain.

Bribes in the form a liquor or cash are offered. Muscle power and money power are used extensively. Women would not stand a chance in the elections if they do not have the support of the male members of the family. Even in the case of election expenditure, the management of it is left in the hands of the husband or other male members of the family, thus leaving no power in the hands of the woman (Banu 2001, 123). Corruption is also rampant in the allocation of resources and contracts at the Gram Panchayat level.

Violence has also come to dominate the RLSG institutions elections in many states thus making participation of disadvantaged sections more difficult. Most such violence seems to have been resulting from the existence of 'caste war' (Panchayati Raj Update 2001). In such a situation, participation and performance of women belonging to SC or ST become absolutely impossible. Moreover, in places that suffer from armed conflicts, bloodshed is common in RLSG elections thus marring the participation of women (Institute of Social Studies Trust 2005).

Further, societal restrictions require that women do not venture into public spaces alone. The traditional concept of women's real place being within the four walls of the house is strongly prevalent in rural India. RLSG institutions are mainly regarded as political entities that are associated with power; and power is traditionally a masculine concept, women are not associated with it. Women who mix around openly with their male counterparts in political meetings are looked down upon as women of dubious character. Therefore, although women can freely attend meetings that are held inside the panchayat office, the presence of women in Gram Sabha meetings is meager as such meetings are mostly held in open spaces and are mainly attended by males. It is also the case in many villages that the daughter-in-laws (bahu) of the house who generally belong to a different village are hardly allowed to have social intercourse with men of her husbands village. Hence participating in RLSG activities in public space is totally out of question (Hust 2002). Sometimes it also so happens that a number of villages come under one GP, in such cases representation and participation of women become difficult as women have much less mobility than men (Vyasulu & Vyasulu 1999). Household responsibilities also restrict the mobility of women. Another major impediment is the 'two-child norm' that has been made a criterion for contesting elections in Rajasthan. Rural India has a high fertility rate and children are borne early (Mathew 2002). Hence due to such norm it becomes extremely difficult for women to enter the RLSG institutions and even when they enter they are mostly confined to

household responsibilities letting the male members of her family (mostly husband) run the office for her. As a result, a new class of *sarpanch pati/ Sarpanch putra* has emerged who manage the affairs of the panchayat on behalf of their wives/Mother (Mathew 2002; Hust 2002, Palanithurai 2001; Vyasulu & Vyasulu 1999; and Leiten 1996).

In case of a woman belonging to Scheduled Caste, such restrictions become further binding since both upper caste female and male members refuse to intermingle with them in RLSG meetings due to the 'purity-pollution' practices. Lower caste representatives do not get much cooperation from the higher castes and women members would not dare speak in front of the high caste representatives (Mathew 2002; and Nayak 1996).

While in case of ascribed status, the lower caste women get discriminated against, in case of social groups; it is the scheduled tribes who become mere 'rubber stamps' in the decision making process of the panchayat. If not the husbands, they are dependent on the other male members of the family, villagers, *sarpanch*, political parties or government officials (Chauhan 2003). Despite reservation, there is little change in the customary patterns of exclusion (World Bank Study year 2001).

Moreover, due to the dominant male discourse, women in panchayats find it difficult to raise issues that would run contrary to that discourse. Such handicaps are more blatant in case of women belonging to SC or ST category, as they cannot dare to take up issues that would provoke the ire of the so called upper caste male. There have been number of instances when tribal women members in the panchayat faced violence and rape when they dared to challenge the authority. Moreover, political parties also play a crucially significant role in directing the affairs of the panchayat. Winning an election requires political party backing. Due to this the elected candidates (men/women) remain loyal to the party line. Since political parties are most controlled by the so called upper caste lobby, disadvantaged sections find it extremely difficult to make their voices heard or had to become mere 'rubber stamps' to the dictates of the party. The ability to take up issue pertaining to gender sensitive discourse is also limited due to the resource restrictions, as money has to be spent as per the dictates of the government schemes and there is very little flexibility.

Issues such as violence against women, female feticide and infanticide, women health, livelihoods etc are rarely taken up (Institute of Social Studies Trust 2005).

Therefore, in such a situation, the argument that having women in political decision-making would bring about empowerment and justice is seriously questioned.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the success of rural local self government largely depends on the representatives and officials who have to be deeply committed to the ideals of rural local self government institutions. It is widely recognised that rural local self government institutions have not brought all the

expected benefits to the common man but the fact that these institutions of grassroots democracy have brought new changes in various fields cannot be denied. The credit for such development rightly goes to those representatives and officials who have selflessly worked in these institutions. There is a reasonable hope that new rural local self government will function for the empowerment of women of the society as a whole and realise the idea of self government, efficiency and welfare in the coming days.

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