

**RURAL LOCAL SELF GOVERNMENT AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN
SOUTH ASIA, 1995-2015**

Summary of the Findings of the Study

Minor Research Project Report

Submitted by

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Summary of the findings of the study

It is a matter of fact that the existing modern system of rural local self government is the contribution of British rule. However, village rural local self government (RLSG) institutions have been in existence since the very beginning of Indian history. Mahatma Gandhi, an ardent supporter of *Gram Swaraj*, wanted to make village panchayat a complete republic vested with requisite legislative, executive and judicial authorities. It was on his insistence that the Article 40 was included in the Constitution under Directive Principal of State Policy.

The democratic system of government in a country can be ensured only if there is mass participation in the governance. Therefore, the system of rural local self government (RLSG), popularly known as panchayati raj, has been considered as an instrument to ensure democracy. It is regarded as a vehicle of development and socio economic transformation of society. RLSG in India initially evolved out of Community Development Program, but it could not succeed for want of requisite people's participation. Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1957) stressed the need of democratic decentralisation and suggested a three-tier system of RLSG in India. The recommendations of the Committee were accepted and various states adopted the Mehta model as per local requirements. However, after mid-sixties, RLSG lost its glamour and the maladies such as inefficiency, corruption, favouritism, uncertainty, irregularity, indifferent attitude of state governments, lack of people initiative etc., crept in RLSG. Besides, establishment of parallel administrative agencies inadequacy of funds, dominance of bureaucracy etc. have made these institutions subordinate units of government. All these weaknesses lead to the appointment of Ashok Mehta Committee (1977), which recommended two-tier structure of RLSG, i.e. Zila Parishad and Mandal Panchayat along with other reformatory measures. However, Government of India did not accept these recommendations.

The need to revamp RLSG remained alive and became an important issue of debates and discussions during the eighties. C. H. Hannumanth Rao Committee (1985), L. M. Singhvi Committee (1986), Thungan Committee (1988) are some of important landmarks where the

issues were discussed and debated in depth. Consequently, Rajiv government introduced The Sixty Fourth Constitutional Amendment bill in 1990, which lapsed due to dissolution of ninth Lok Sabha. It was Congress government again which introduced a fresh bill in September 1991 with some modifications and got it passed in December 1992 as the Seventy Third Constitutional Amendment Act and later on it was ratified by the state legislatures.

The state governments were asked to prepare new rural local self government legislations or to amend their existing laws absorbing the provisions of the Central Act. As a result, The Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act 1994 was enacted and implemented in the state. The elections of RLSG institutions were held in January 1995 as per the provisions of new Act. It has been expected that the revamped RLSG institutions would provide opportunities to the people at grass root level to formulate plans and execute them as per their own needs, suitabilities and resources. The new enactment also provides for greater representation of the disadvantaged sections and places emphasis on economic development and social justice for the rural people in the state.

After the enactment of the 73rd constitutional amendment act, 1993 grassroots democracy and decentralised development are sought to be achieved in the Indian villages through the introduction of new Rural Local Self Government (RLSG) with constitutional status and authority. Rural people are allowed not only to form and operate local self government but also to formulate and implement village, block and district level developmental plans based on their 'felt needs' through their own representatives in the RLSG. While the task of electing the right type of local leaders is in the hands of the rural citizens, the leaders on their part are vested with the authority and responsibility of ensuring grassroots democracy and development with social justice in rural India.

The socio-economic and political background of the elected representatives of the RLSG institutions was examined to find out the relationship between socio-economic background and their performance.

This project indicates that the traditional dominance of elderly people is withering away and the younger people are shouldering the responsibility of the grass root level power structure. One of the factors responsible for this trend can be attributed to the lowering of age to contest RLSG elections. The new enactment has also enhanced the representative character of RLSG institutions as it has provided 50 per cent of seats for women in addition to the reservation for SC/ST and OBC. Thus, the dominance of males, at least in term of composition of these

institutions, has not been there now. There are some instances when women could get elected to the unreserved seats in rural local government institutions.

A majority of elected leaders are literate and many of them have higher educational qualifications. A trend has been observed that educational level of leaders increases as we move up towards Zila Parishad level. However, there is a very low educational level of parents of elected leaders. The rural leaders come mainly from farming community and from reserved category. The link between land holdings and rural leadership is also eroding away mainly because of the reservation system, downsizing of land holdings, emergence of nuclear families and the process of political development in country as a whole. Almost all the rural leadership except a few leaders of PS and ZP level have residences in villages itself. The rural leaders are not highly prosperous and are living a moderate life. Although some of them, particularly at ZP level, are maintaining a good living standard as they are endowed with rural and urban property and substantial source of income. Several rural leaders are poor, but most of them are from reserved categories. Only about one-fourth of leaders at PS and ZP levels have affiliations with political parties and most of them with Bhartiya Janta Party and Congress. Reservation of seats for women in RLSG institutions has encouraged them for active involvement in political process. It has provided opportunity for them to participate in decision-making and implementation processes in rural society. Prior to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act a few women representatives were elected to the RLSG in Hanumangarh district. Nevertheless, the Act has changed the concept of male dominance over rural local bodies. After the implementation of the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act, a number of women have come forward to contest elections on some of the RLSG seats. They have contested elections while the others have even contested and won general seats too. Their number in RLSG, presence in meetings and involvement in the decision making process paved the way for their entry into the political scene at state and national levels. As a result of this, the women's organisations and political parties have started demanding reservation of one-third seats for women in state assemblies and parliament.

Government policy of reservation of seats for women to the tune of 1/2 of total seats and chairpersonship in RLSG has facilitated their political participation and empowerment in the Hanumangarh district. Family is the most powerful base for more than half of the women representatives in their march to RLSG institutions followed by women organisation and the positive attitude of the village towards them. It was observed that a few women leaders were

unable to attend the RLSG meetings on account of domestic works, distance between the meeting place and home, pressure from family etc. Thus women leaders are unable to enjoy a say in the meetings. 'Proxy' attendance and voting in the meetings in RLSG bodies by their spouses or male members in the family are also rampant. It was also observed that women leaders had to face more gender related problems at the GP level in comparison to their counterparts at the PS and ZP levels. Thus, despite the heartening beginning women leaders have a long way to go in terms of influencing the outcomes of policies which strength RLSG democracy. The complete realisation of women potential is contingent upon the role of the state in providing a 'congenial' political space and protection against violence on women (civil society in general and women in particular) in order to change the traditional patriarchal culture and 'mindset of people.' A proactive democratic attitude towards female is almost the need of the hour. The task is no doubt challenging for a state like Rajasthan where there is higher degree of female illiteracy, gender inequality and gender injustice. Only in partnership with the latter can women's (members) visibility be translated into presence and their formal descriptive representation into a substantive one.

The involvement of women representatives at PS and ZP levels is satisfactory because they are more educated and politically aware, although, the women representatives at higher level also depends upon attitude of family members. Thus, It can be concluded that it will take more time to enable women leaders to participate actively in affairs of these institutions, independently. The major reasons behind inhibitions of women leaders are prevailing social and cultural traditions in rural society.

The elected representatives of RLSG wish to subordinate officials so that these institutions can be made more efficient and accountable to the people. However, it is not easy to do so as most of the elected leaders, particularly at GP level, are illiterate or semi-literate. They may not be able to subordinate the officials even if endowed with requisite powers. However, it may be possible at higher levels because these leaders are more educated and politically aware. Thus, rural leaders wanted that RLSG institutions should be free from administrative and political control being exercised by the higher ups.

The cause of conflict between the officials and non-officials is due to inexperience, non-clarity of power and different socio-economic and cultural background. It can be resolved by means of comprehensive training, clear-cut demarcation of jurisdiction and mutual understanding for

effective functioning of these bodies. However, the relationship between the elected representatives and bureaucrats is found cordial and their interactions are normal.

The Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act has entrusted a long list of functions to RLSG institutions as per the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. Therefore, a need for financial autonomy was felt and State Finance Commission was established for this purpose. But there is still a lack of adequate funds for rural local government. The Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act empowers RLSG institutions to levy, collect and appropriate taxes, duties, fees etc. However, a close observation of relevant provisions reveals that these institutions do not have powers in real sense to impose taxes as approval in this regard is taken from state government. House tax is the only major revenue fetching tax imposed by the GP. Nevertheless, the elected leaders are reluctant to impose this tax as it erodes their popularity. Panchayat Samiti and Zila Parishads are not empowered to levy and collect any tax without prior permission of the government.

On the basis of the respondents' perceptions regarding the achievement of objectives, RLSG institutions are perceived both as units of self government, as well as agencies of the government. These institutions facilitate the mechanism of decentralisation of powers essential for strengthening democracy. However, the extent of devolution largely depends upon the wish of the state government. These institutions act as the nurseries of democracy, which are essential to develop local leadership in the rural community. The rural community wish to send representatives to these institutions based on unanimous elections and disfavour any type of involvement of political parties in the elections and functioning of RLSG institutions.

Most of elected leaders are motivated to contest the elections by their friends, family members and caste-fellows. The elected leaders usually participate actively and discuss and express their views during the meetings, except women representatives at GP level and that too because of the prevailing social traditions.

The rural leaders also want to attain more powers and functions through these institutions, viz. financial, administrative and judicial autonomy. This could be at a level that they may be able to redress people's grievances and can solve the local problems. It is also expected that their role and involvement in the development activities should be enhanced. They also stress the need that at least the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act must be translated into reality as per its spirit. It is premature to analyse the performance of rural local self government as it is still in the stage of infancy after implementation of the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj act, 1994. Thus, it can be

concluded that the success and failure of RLSG will largely depend upon the will of political and administrative leadership of the state.

In the light of these findings following conclusions are achieved

1. Transformation of RLSG leadership from

(i) *Male to mixed male-female leadership*: through which the characterised male dominant traditional leadership of RLSG in Rajasthan has been broken as 50 per cent women representatives have got elected to the RLSG. and

(ii) *Gerontocracy to Youthful dynamic leadership*: as far as rural local self government in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan is concerned, reins of power, initiative and dominance of the rural community has passed on the hands of the more action and younger sections of the population replacing those in the older age group. The present political leadership of RLSG in this state is increasingly becoming more dynamic, purposeful and functional in addressing the problems of local governance and development.

2. Empowerment of women

In Hanumangarh district the highest number of RLSG women have been returned from the OBC category because of their numerical strength in terms of total population This is followed by women of SC category because of the reservation provisions in the RLSG . The least number of women candidates from the so called upper caste clearly indicates the shift of grassroots leadership from dominant upper caste to the poor, weak, disorganised, disadvantaged sections. Thus the hypothesis *inclusion of reservation provisions in local self government empowers women* in chapter one *is proved correct*.

This is a welcome trend leading to empowerment of women, realisation of the goal of equality, their participation in the decision-making process as well as development with social justice.

There is no doubt that women have been empowered following their participation in RLSG work. But the degree of empowerment varies from block to block and situation to situation. If a woman conducts RLSG affairs on her own, fully participates in the decision-making process and gets things done for the community by interacting with outside agencies, she is almost fully empowered. At the other extreme, if a woman does not come out of her house or remove veil and sign on the dotted line (or gives her thumb impression) as directed by his husband acting as

sarpanch pati, it is a case of zero empowerment, In between there are many cases, in varying degrees of empowerment. A woman who leaves her home, goes out in the public sphere to a RLSG office, and occupies a chair near other men and women is also on the road to empowerment, even if she keeps quiet in the meetings. These are her first steps on the road of empowerment.

In matters of empowerment one has to take a long-term view. What will happen twenty or thirty years hence? Thanks to his process of participation, women representatives of the future will be much more assertive, confident and competent.

3. Participation in decision-making process

There has been fairly high degree of participation of its members in the work of rural local self government. The political and development participation of the emerging political leaders arises from the fact that the majority of them have attended RLSG meetings regularly, deliberated and discussed public issues of interest, took vital decisions on policy matters falling in their legitimate sphere by different modes and methods. Nearly half of the emerging local leaders enjoy their work, the other half has mixed feelings. While some of them find it sometimes hard and sometimes easy, a few of them regard their role as very challenging. For smaller sections of them, their work is a sort of training to acquire the pre requisite skill to nurture their future ambitions in the field of politics and governance.

4. Rural Local Self Government and bureaucracy

As far as the political bureaucratic interference at the local level in rural areas is concerned, it was hypothesised that *less bureaucratic intervention and more financial resources strengthen the local government institutions.*

No doubt the *empirical findings of the study have sustained* the above hypothesis but there is a caveat here. It has come to the light that some less bureaucratic intervention leaders tend to intervene in the “day to day administration” (the official domain) and thus, accomplishing their own selfish interests or to win over the concerned bureaucratic support for indulgence in illegal improper action and unethical conduct such as corruption, nepotism, favouritism and other ascriptive motives and purpose. The startling revelation that “most administrators” are not inclined to displease their political bosses goes to show that they readily put up with undue political interference in administration and tolerate or connive with political leaders in implementing patently improper and illegal orders and actions of the politicians.

This type of aberration, connivance and nexus between local politicians and civil servants for wrong reasons is highly condemnable. It may result in politicisation of the civil servants; threat to public interest, individual's rights and freedoms; corruption, nepotism favouritism and other crime and lapses. In short, a great danger to democracy and development.

It is therefore suggested that local leaders should not misuse and abuse their position and powers for self or party or any other interest to the detriment of public interest. Corrupt politicians and conniving officials should be held accountable for their misdeeds and action. Great public vigilance and active participation of the rural citizens can check the malaise.

The constitution of a separate cadre of local self government employee can help in containing the administrative confusion arising out of the "dual control" over the administrative officials on deputation from state government departments to the district and block development administration. However the idea of a separate local government cadre is not acceptable to the overwhelming majority of the local government officials.

7. RLSG in South Asian Countries:

1. Pakistan

This research has argued that in order to understand the current RLSG in Pakistan it is imperative to view the reform in the historical context of previous such reforms. In particular, a continuing theme that emerges in this context is that these reforms have somewhat paradoxically been brought about by non-representative regimes such as the British during the pre-independence period and the military during the post-independence period. In fact each of the three military regimes in Pakistan has implemented RLSG reforms and each political government that has followed has undermined these reforms or at best simply ignored the rural local governments. These reforms have all involved decentralising from the Province to local levels but often a recentralisation at the Federal levels.

Therefore it can be construed that reforms have been used as a means for a non-representative centre to gain legitimacy by bypassing the political agents at the provincial and national levels.

2. Bangladesh

Rural local self government has now a more democratised structure in Bangladesh. There are no longer any official and nominated members or chairpersons in the zila parishad. Indirect election of members and chairpersons has replaced the previous system. There are also reserved seats for women who are now to be indirectly elected and no longer to be nominated in the past. Political

parties are playing an active role in RLSG elections and functioning. This is increasing public responsiveness and accountability of the parishads.

However, RLSG has certain deficiencies as well constraining its functioning.

3. Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the provision of representation to the youth aged 18 to 35 years by reservation of 40 per cent of elected seats in the Shabhas and Councils have been welcomed by several observers as a positive step for enhancing representative character of the institution. On the other hand, discrimination on the basis of age in representation has been criticised by some others as a regressive step in democratisation process.

Introduction of proportionate representation system in elections to the *Shabha* and the council has been appreciated by several political leaders and parties providing for fair political opportunities to those wishing to compete for membership or chairmanship of these institutions. Sri Lanka has a large majority of educated citizens. Moreover, there has been high percentage of voting over the years since introduction of universal franchise in the third decade of the century, thereby indicating political awareness among the people. Also there is a public debate going on in the country regarding very substantial decentralisation of political and administrative system. This might also result in appropriate reorganisation of RLSG to provide enlarged opportunities for local participation of people in its decision-making process and activities.

4 Nepal

At present the two-tier rural local government system in Nepal is made up of the village development committee (VDC) and the district development committee (DDC). Every VDC has nine wards, each with a five-members elected committee, including one woman member. The Local Self Government Act (LSGA) has reserved 20 percent seats in ward committee for woman and at least one woman has to be nominated to the VDC and DDC. Thus the total number of women members in RLSG now comes up to be around 40,000.

The LSGA is the most comprehensive legal instrument that provides for representation of the disadvantaged in local government bodies.

However the local bodies are facing numerous challenges, including problems in imposing and collecting direct taxes; weak programme planning and implementation; weak coordination among RLSG, line agencies and NGOs; poor participation of female members and political

instability. At present, there are no elected representative in the RLSG since elections could not be held due to the Maoist insurgency in the country.

5. Assessing India:

The Indian system of the RLSG has evolved quite a lot since the 1882 Resolution of the Lord Rippon Government. Later, through the 73rd amendment to the Constitution and subsequent developments like reservation for the disadvantaged sections, regular elections, devolution of the financial powers and three tier systems, RLSG took on a qualitatively different hue in India.

Local elections have energised the system through new political institutions. The system now in place is significantly different from earlier. All this makes the RLSG in India very important, and very genuine. The RLSG system has taken deep-seated root. However no system is free of its drawbacks and shortcomings. There is always a scope for learning and improvement. India can learn some lessons from its neighbours like reservation for peasants and religious minorities from Pakistan, role of NGOs from Nepal, proportional representation system from Sri Lanka and indirect nomination of women from Bangladesh.

The above debate leads us to definite conclusion that inspite of the shortcomings the position of India among the neighboring developing countries of the Indian sub-continent is far healthier. It *sustains the hypothesis that in spite of its limitations, Indian local self government system is more inclusive and effective than her neighbours.*

Limitations of the project

The project was done with a purpose to understand the extent to which rural women can be involved in attaining political empowerment in South Asia through reservation. But due to lack of communication with elected women representatives of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, field survey of these countries was not to be done. So this project is based on secondary data. Moreover, the sample size is not very large; therefore, it cannot be representative of entire South Asia. Hence the conclusion can be best representing a glance in women's political empowerment. On the basis of these findings one can understand the role of women reservation in empowering women.