

Role of Education and Awareness in Empowering Hill Women of Uttarakhand about Functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions

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Abstract

At present, all over the country, states have delegated powers to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in terms of article 243 and the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution have decentralized governance up to the village level. The active involvement and participation of PRIs and its mandated functions in most of the sectors of rural economy is urgently required which would not only provide livelihood and food security locally but also contribute towards minimising existing pressure on natural resources. The hill women play a significant role in natural resource management, on which the rural livelihood and the very survival of hill families/communities depend. Despite of that, women have been and still are excluded from production of and representation in many socio-cultural and political decision making activities. Therefore, there is need to provide detailed information about rural development programmes/activities (being executed by the state/central governments and their line departments) and make them empower about roles and functions of PRIs through education and awareness. The present paper describes in detail that how hill women are actively involved in various mandated activities of PRIs for hill area development.

Introduction

Two of the significant shifts in India, during the 21st century, have been the increased attention to the delivery of public services on one hand and greater decentralisation of responsibilities for their services on the others. Ever since

the Constitution becomes operational, various states have experimented with different models of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). However, this dream of Mahatma Gandhi was in true sense, fulfilled in 1992 when the Parliament through the 73rd Amendment provided the constitutional backing for

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establishment and functioning of PRIs for rural self governance for sustainable development. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution together would always be remembered for creating leadership opportunities for millions of men and women at the grassroots level. It is also proposed that 50% reservation would be provided to women in the PRIs to represent the issues of rural development in the right perspective so as to achieve the goal of good governance at the grassroots levels.

Women serve as the backbone of the hill societies. They represent more than 50% of the population living in the hills and actively participate in the social, cultural and economic activities. They are the major contributors to the labour of farming, livestock, domestic and forest resource collections/utilisation systems etc. They play a significant role in natural resource management, on which the rural livelihood and the very survival of hill families/communities depend. Despite that, women have been and still are excluded from production of and representation in many socio-cultural and political decision making activities. Hill women have further challenges to face, they belong to societies that are marginalized, traditional, and cut off from the mainstream societies. Hardships of living in remote and far-flung areas, harsh environment, and topography which make their tasks more arduous and increasing tendency for men to migrate for employment is further increasing women's workloads. But there is a general lack of appreciation of women's role and skills in managing and looking after the responsibilities of their

own families, and are often left out from the various capacity building programme and training in rural development and decision making processes.

Therefore, there is need to provide detail information about rural development programmes/activities (being executed by the state/central governments and their line departments) and make them empower about roles and functions of PRIs through education and awareness. Education need to be encouraged as a means of empowering women from grass root level. Educational and awareness programmes for women need to incorporate the mandated functions and responsibility of PRIs for village development and thus develop capacity and skill in the field of enhancement of rural livelihood, leadership and strategic planning skills as well as confidence building, role in decision-making in local level governance, etc. Policies need to support mainstream gender issues and acknowledge that women are not only capable to manage their families but also acquired knowledge of managing their resources and environment. Thus, hill women need to be involved in PRIs and their role need to be ensured in various programme activities that improve their capacities in addressing the issues relevant to rural development and natural resource management. Besides, women are also to be involved in policy making at local, regional and national level and given equal opportunities to participate in decision making that meet norms set out for public accountability of including financial accountability, both upward as well as downward to the people. Moreover, empowered women play an active role and responsibility to effectively monitor and

exercise vigilance over the work of their elected representatives to secure both effectively gains in service delivery by the Panchayats and promote transparent, responsive and accountable grassroots development through grassroots democracy.

Problem, Definition and Concept of Women Empowerment

Women and their problems have acquired a steadily growing importance in our socio-cultural milieu. But even today no where women do have equal rights and status with men. Women have always made a very significant contribution to their societies, but a patriarchal conspiracy has prevented women's role from receiving its due recognition (Maria, 1980). Women empowerment is fast emerging as an important slogan from the 1990s. This slogan is gradually being integrated with that of participation, advanced so vociferously by many in the late 1970s and 1980s. Over the past two decades, conditions of women have improved. There have been improvement in several domains of women's activity. More and more women are entering the work force. A greater number of women are overcoming traditional barriers to realize their potentials. Yet a gap exists between men and women with respect to overall development (Padamnabhan, 2001). Although a number of explanations have been advanced to account for this gap, the most important part of this analysis serves only academic purposes. What appears to be important is the strategy to bridge the gap and to implement corrective measures and strategies for

women's development (Neeta, 2000). In the context of empowering women, the several programme/activities and strategies have been geared to political, social and economic agenda.

Empowering and Involving Women in Various Roles and Mandated Functions of the PRIs

- ***Women's roles and services in participatory planning and decision making***

Hill women have enormous farming workloads than men, share additional domestic responsibilities and other work jobs. Although they are increasingly integrated at all level in the management of family structure, had only limited success in gaining access and rights to, and participation in, decision making processes with the family level. Appropriate technologies to reduce the physical burden of hill women need to be designed, improved, tested, implemented and disseminated using traditional/indigenous knowledge.

- ***Education, information and communication for village human resource management***

Illiteracy and lack of access to health-related information affects hill women more than men. Education need to be encouraged as a means of empowering women. Educated women delay marriage, prefer fewer children (small family) and more likely to adopt family planning measures, and understand their rights better. A strong mechanism need to be

developed to increase grassroots women' participation and provide forum through which they can update their knowledge and advocate common interests and concerns related to rural development. Besides, educational and skill development programmes for women need to incorporate managerial and technical skills, encompass occupations thought of as men's domain and major focus on development related issues. Access to information about markets, other livelihoods that recognise, utilize and support the diversity of hill environment needs to be facilitated. Capacity building activities and platforms for the sharing of experiences and information with other need to be encouraged.

- ***Natural resource management and livelihood issues and their relevance of environmental governance at the local level***

Hills are rich in natural resources aside purely for conservation and management can lead to conflict between the resource users and authorities responsible for conservation. Banning the resources may affect the marginal hill societies disproportionately, and increase the workloads for women. Such restriction on bioresources on which they have traditional rights over centuries can also lead to rapid depletion of resources as the sense of ownership is lost.

- ***Women oriented framework, policies and approach in PRIs***

Although gender mainstreaming is important in developing appropriate

policies in aspects of governance, women focused programme can be useful in situations in which women lack a voice, and can help participants build confidence, social capital, and skills.

- ***Capacity and skill development in the area of entrepreneurship and appropriate rural technologies***

The involvement of women representative(s) of PRIs is limited even though livelihood improvement is the major goal as listed in the mandated functions of PRIs. Thus, enabling access to hill specific simple rural technologies would be partly about making more productive, useful technologies available and partly providing opportunities (institutional, financial, social, micro-credit, skill etc.) that support access to rural women in these technologies linked to entrepreneurships. But building women's capacities/skills to make these choices means not just bringing new rural technologies to their doorstep, but addressing their organisational capacities and opening new channels of information and knowledge. This is particularly very important in the hills where women have very limited access to modern facilities or to secure external help for solving the local problems. Women need to be provided access to the knowledge and skills needed to plan, operate and manage an enterprise so that they can sustain their enterprises with the returns. The training must focus on the

conditions and resources available in the regions and help promote skills, quality management, and business development, market linkages for products that acknowledge the cultural and biological diversities of the communities.

- ***Involvement and participation in planning advocacy and decision making bodies of PRIs***

Women have an important role to play in the development of sustainable and environmentally sound production and consumption systems, but they always remain sidelined when it comes to decision making. Women's representation need to be ensured in decision making bodies at all levels of PRIs. They need to be informed about their rights and involved in decision making and the development of the plans for rural development, and provided with training so that they can overcome the fear of participating. Formation of hill women's association need to be supported and facilitated to help in bringing women issues to the forum. They must be given a voice and their specific concerns addressed when formulating policy planning initiatives.

- ***Awareness for social security and functions and programme activities of PRIs for rural development***

For empowering women government have launched several developmental schemes/programmes for their well being. But it was found that majority of the women in rural areas

are not at all aware about these programmes/activities. The major focus of all these programmes is to bring them into the mainstream of development. The special programmes have been envisaged with the view to enhance the socio-economic conditions of women in the paid employment. Therefore, motivating and mobilising them for participation in such activities and helping them to enjoy the fruits of their labour, define the holistic human perspective of a community.

In addition, rural women need to be made fully aware about the functions and roles of PRIs in other rural development programmes supported by central/state governments those are being executed by state/central line agencies/department in the following sectors: (a) agriculture, irrigation and water management, (b) social forestry and forestry, (c) small scale village and cottage industries, (d) rural housing, (e) drinking water, (f) rural road network, (g) rural electrification and non-conventional energy sources, (h) poverty alleviation, (i) education, (k) cultural activities, health, family welfare and sanitation, (l) women and child development, social welfare, social welfare of weaker sections/SC/ST/youth, and (m) public distribution system, etc.

- ***Effective participation of women in local level governance through PRIs***

The hill regions require basic structure and support systems to bring about fair, transparent and

good governance. Unfortunately this is totally lacking in most of the regions. Women at grassroots level need to be empowered and their capacities to be developed. The social and political frameworks to be developed to encourage initiatives by local communities. There is a need to further devolve and define roles and functions, empower and develop capacities of district and grassroots level institutions particularly at Panchayat level. On the basis of the principle of sharing, participation of women groups at different levels in decision-making and implementation, is extremely relevant for the rural development governance. Governance is about a process that includes formal government but also embraces a wider notion of all those agencies and stakeholders that play a role in the control of individuals and groups in society.

Conclusion

Rural development issues need to be segregated in a manner ensuring effective interventions are made at the appropriate level. Women have always had a central role in managing and operating in most of the household activities in the rural areas of the hills. Their activities also maintained the essential linkages between the forest, livestock and agriculture. The role of women merits special recognition and consideration in development. In recent years, however, environmental degradation, poor resource management, and increased migration of men to plains have deteriorated food security and added more workload of women.

Women are much more inclined than men to attend educative and training courses. After having been isolated from the development and communication for centuries, they are more curious than their male counterparts, more generous and more open to new ideas. The gap between knowledge and action, between information and implementation has widened. In order to better address the issues relevant to hill women, it is necessary to understand the status of women compared to men and to strengthen women's roles in integrated rural development. Thus relevant information in various areas such as proper education, training and skill development in rural development programmes/activities facilitation, information and opportunities need to be made available or provided to rural women. There are reasons for which any social policy for the hills hopes to succeed must be able to cope with the needs and desire of women, which can no longer be ignored or underestimated. Active participation of women in grassroots planning will bring about the desired transformation of the region by developing suitable options of livelihood enhancement that would lead towards prosperity.

Encourage and facilitate women groups at village level to restructure the system of self-government at the Panchayat level to achieve the constitutional objective of making them institutions of self-government. Although, strengthening is required at all levels. The weakest link seems to be the local level in rural development related governance issues. An effective

local level unit of governance could be located at the district. While strengthening the various institutions, there is a need to have a paradigm shift in personal and administrative policies. All the policies and programme should lead to quantifiable improvement in rural development quality. In fact all the agencies have to have cross-sectoral concerns in their developmental agencies. In fact, good governance with regard to rural

development and bioresource management is difficult to attain unless there is an equally effective overall governance structure. An improved rural sector governance and implementation of effective poverty alleviation programmes could be step towards this goal. Re-engineering of various process and an effective use of modern information could also lead to an improved rural development related empowerment and governance.

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