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A WOMAN PRADHAN IN MADHUBANI DISTRICT OF BIHAR: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) have been instrumental in driving positive change at the grassroots level. India stands at the forefront globally, with 1.4 million women serving as elected members of Panchayati Raj Institutions / Rural Local Bodies, constituting 46% of the total elected representatives of PRIs. India's remarkable success stories, where EWRs have driven positive and impactful change through community leadership and engagement, advancing SDG localization can be seen . EWRs play catalytic roles in championing gender equality, poverty alleviation, and inclusive development at the grassroots.
This paper is a case study which will examine the role and functions of a woman Pradhan (Head of Gram Panchayat) Smt.Savita Chaudhary in Madhubani district of Bihar and she is the Pradhan of Panchayat Satghara.

KEYWORDS-*Pradhan, PRIs, EWR, Panchayats*

INTRODUCTION

It is now an emerging fact that women are changing the nature of Local Governance in India post 73rd Constitutional Amendment,1992. Panchayati Raj Amendment Act 1992 pave the way for increased political participation for women in Local Self-Governance.The percentage of seats reserved for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) varies by state, with some states reserving 50% of seats for women. Now after 30 years of enactment of Panchayati Raj Act, it has yielded some positive results—in development issues such as education, health, nutrition, increase in family income. Women representatives have demonstrated that they have critical information about community resources, are able to learn quickly about how to lead effective community-centered development, are inclined to be more inclusive and are adept at managing funds. Role of women is now becoming an essential part of fulfilling objective of Rural Development. Currently Government of Developing Countries are working toward achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 2030 in which Local Self-Government is playing positive role towards achieving this goal. Sustainability has became an essential part of overall development process because after globalization the way we tried to achieve development put human lives at risk although we have achieved rapid economic development.

Environment degradation, deterioration in human health and deterioration in many essential value in society is a negative impact of globalization which make it imperative for policy planner to think development in a sustainable way. If women become a part of policy planning the goal of achieving Sustainable Development become easy.

Katharina Raabe et al. (2009), in their research paper published based on the field-based study done in the districts of Karnataka, reveals the constrains that are hindering the initiative of 73rd Amendment of India's Constitution to bring gender equality through women seats reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. They have shown decision making power for the women are still not sufficient to give them freedom of equal status with their male counterparts, due to the active social restrictions.

Santosh Kumar and Nishith Prakash (2012), in their case study have chosen districts of Bihar to observe the improvement of health and hygiene problems of these rural parts after the participation of EWRs(Elected Women Representatives) in PRIs (Panchayati Raj Institutions). Apart from that, they have extended towards noting the amount of women encouragement and support from the society given for the women leaderships in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Anuradha Ranjan Kumari and Neeraj Singh (2015) observed that in Indian Constitution, there are provisions for equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their social and economic status. It was only role performance by the elected women members that was not directly influenced substantially by caste or personal education or family size or family type or house type or even empowerment. In fact it was the degree of participation which acted as deciding factor in performance by the elected women members in Gram Panchayat. Participation played the single most vital role in the role performance of elected women members of Gram Panchayats.

As per Pahel Project Report (2015), women PRIs(Panchayati Raj Institutions) members have gained sufficient decisive senses to give their opinion on public health, school midday meal, raising PRIs(Panchayati Raj Institutions) funds and others.

Pragya Rai (2016) shows that although it is very hard to participate for women in Panchayat work, some manages to do it and are very serious and active in scheme implementations, e.g. Self-Help Groups, MGNREGA and sanitation. Specially, women are very much engaged in MGNREGA. They are also active in health scheme implementation. Women stated that before the reservation system they were not so vocal and aware about many schemes. But after the reservation they attained

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new knowledge, and now they have got a chance to do something for their people.

Under the Panchayati Raj Amendment Act 1992 and Bihar Panchayati Raj Act,2006, women were kept as essential partner for grassroot development which is a major takeaway for this policy intervention. The question is how women participation in grassroot politics help create a sustainable society? Arguments for this, as per research studies by B Montanari,2019 found that women are always a repositor of traditional knowledge system which is transferred from generation to generation as far as rural society is concerned. Women is leading the family, so leadership is already inbuilt in her quality in matter of family health, child education and tradition. Despite women not always being a family head in patriarchy system but in day-to-day family health and hygiene, children education, environmental protection quality is inbuilt in her character.

M Bijlani,2022 found that rural women pro environmental behaviors and their conservationist nature help to create a sustainable rural society.

Why this case study was taken up?

Bihar became the first state to implement 50 percent reservation to women. It created a new hope in grassroot politics in Bihar. But after 18 year of its implementation women are struggling to perform their assigned duties. Patriarchy, lack of education and people apathy towards government institution pushed Panchayat work in the stage of underdevelopment. In this scenario, searching a performing Panchayat especially headed by women is a herculean task. During pilot study of research an elected woman Pradhan who possess all quality of empowered woman Pradhan was found. This paper will highlight her success story . So, this case study examines the role and functions of a woman Pradhan Smt.Savita Chaudhary in Madhubani district of Bihar and she is the Pradhan of Panchayat Satghara.

Who is a Pradhan?

Pradhan is head of village Panchayat. A Pradhan hold constitutional authority to lead Panchayat for overall socio-economic development of rural area. Pradhan of the Gram Panchayat shall be directly elected by the voters enrolled in the voters list of that Gram Panchayat. In Bihar, head of the Panchayat is called Mukhiya as per Bihar Panchayati Raj Act ,2006. Pradhan is known for different name in different states. In most of the northern stats they called Pradhan or Sarpanch.

The case study has the following objectives:

1. To understand the factors that enabled women representatives to participate and lead in the PRI (Panchayat Raj Institution)at the Gram Panchayat level despite the challenges and constraints they face.
2. To understand how women's participation and leadership in the PRIs(Panchayat Raj Institutions) is changing the dynamics in Local Self-Governance, leading to changes in different aspects of their life. The following aspects have been explored

i. Self-confidence and self-initiative
ii. Reason for contesting elections
iii. Freedom of speech and expression
iv. Nature of meetings of the Gram Sabha
v. Dealing with administration
vi. Decision making and empowerment at home
vii. Leadership in PRI as team leader at Gram Panchayat level
viii. Cooperation with multiple stakeholders and beneficiaries including co-partners Factors motivating EWRs (Elected Women Representatives) to participate in Panchayat.

Research Tools

Interview schedules were used to obtain the required informations. The interview schedules investigated demographic profile of the respondents, factors affecting EWR (Elected Women Representatives)in performing their roles (as per research questions) and expectation and suggestions for better leadership. The data was collected in the months of March and April 2024.

Case Presentation

Interview schedules were used to elicit the required information including the demographic profile of the respondents, factors affecting EWR(Elected Women Representatives) in performing their roles and in obtaining their expectations and suggestions for better leaderships. Smt. Savita Choudhary story is an inspiring story of women-empowerment, leadership in PRIs(Panchayat Raj Institutions) and community development. She won second term as Mukhiya in last Panchayat election held in 2021 and successfully completing her term. She won second term with higher margin of votes.The Panchayat she is representing has a high number of upper caste Rajput population. Interestingly it has a higher number of Rajput population, she managed to win second term with higher margin despite belonging to extremely backward class. Smt.Savita Choudhary has significantly contributed to the development of her Panchayat. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors led to her success. These factors include developing herself first through awareness and trainings from odd jobs for her livelihood, good intention to do something for herself and others through network with agencies like DISHA (Development Coordination and Monitoring Committee) before taking up the leadership role of becoming an effective and capable Pradhan. Her role in Covid management is exemplary as she helps those people who have no ration card to get free ration. She said '*jinke pass ration card nahi hai unko bhukhe nahi marne denge'* (those who do not have ration card will not let them starve to death). She uses her own fund to manage food for underprivileged people during the time of crisis.

Secondly, among the community she always follow unbiased approach. She confidently goes to meet the Block Development Officer, attending district level meeting, deal with community dispute and also goes to visit police station to settle disputes. She did commendable job by engaging people in PRI (Panchayat Raj Institution)not by just knowing and understanding the PRI (Panchayat Raj Institution)process, issues and challenges but doing concrete action for results. Some examples of her work in her 1st and 2nd term exhibited this very well i.e. infrastructure development, women mobilization, livelihood improvements, etc. As Pradhan, she further built positive relationships with all stakeholders within and without the Panchayat including local MLAs, ministers and

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made sure that her activities and policies did not alienate those who opposed her. By displaying maturity and active engagement in her interactions and using a direct and focused approach in problem solving, Smt. Savita Choudhary from marginalized family has been able to bring people together and demonstrate positive changes in the community and local-self-governance. She believes that intent and spirit of the 73rd Constitutional Amendments can only be achieved with a strong political will towards empowering Panchayat and not just treating them as mere agents for implementing various programs and schemes in a top-down manner. Autonomy and community need to be prioritized and top-down planning, delayed decisions on fund disbursement and red-tapism need to be changed. She acknowledges that there are some efforts for decentralizing by way of shifting of funds and responsibility to the Panchayat. Smt. Savita Choudhary struggles, issues, and challenges as an outcome of this case study could be further leveraged by concerned trainers, stakeholders, and policy makers in this domain to strengthen leadership and build efficiency in the institutions of Panchayati Raj in India.

Following are the results of the objectives:

i. Smt. Savita Choudhary strongly believes that reservation for women has provided her an opportunity for initial entry into the system of PRIs(Panchayat Raj Institutions). Being an elected representative has increased her circle of influence and action to become more visible and recognized as a leader and changemaker in development issues and action than as a member of a women's group. She describes her journey from a 'Gharelu Aurat' (a woman confined to the household and its chores) to an empowered women leader of her community through positive support of her husband. As an elected representative in the PRI(Panchayat Raj Institution)she has said - "With family support and community support women can empower and actively participate in Panchayati Raj function and deliver better result for making a society better for living. She possess some inherent quality of helping other which makes her popular in village. She does not discriminate anyone basis on caste, religion. Despite belonging to extremely backward class, her reputation in upper caste is quite impressive. As far as caste dynamics is concern, her Panchayat has high caste dominance about 70 percent population is Rajput. Despite this caste combination, extremely backward women getting importance shows her ability.

ii.Smt.Savita Choudhary outdoor mobility has been gained from exposure visits including networking group meeting. She is active member of District Development Coordination committee and attend regular meeting held in district town Madhubani. This DISHA meeting makes her aware of recent updates regarding act and rules of Panchayat.It shows how network of women and Panchayat capacity building body help elected women representative to perform duties assigned to her in Bihar Panchayati Raj Act,2006.

iii. Smt.Savita Choudhary participation in PRI (Panchayat Raj Institution)as EWR (Elected Women Representative) has not only influenced her participation in economic decisions but enhanced control over economic resources at home.

iv. At household level too, not only does Smt. Savita Choudhary receive the support of her husband and children but her neighbors too have recognized her leadership and boost her self-confidence with continuous endorsement and support.

v. Smt. Savita Chouhary participation as EWR(Elected Women Representative) in Panchayat has increased her influence and participation in social, community and political activities. For example, she has also earned respect and recognition of the Up-Pradhan (Vice President) of the Panchayat, who is male and whose political affiliation is different from her. Not does he recognize her capability but endorses her in all decisions as a supporter and co-partner. She is now highly motivated and aspiring to contest the Zilla Parishad/MLA election to benefit many more people with her leadership.Her story is an excellent example of women's empowerment and leadership in PRIs (Panchayat Raj Institutions) and community development. She has significantly contributed to the development of her Panchayat. Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors led to her success . These factors include her own drive for educating and training herself, experimenting with different types of sources of livelihood and an inherent desire to do something for herself and others through network with agencies like DISHA and Government. As Pradhan, she built upon the knowledge, skills, and networks she established as member and leader of the women's group to build positive relationships with all stakeholders within and outside the Panchayat including with local MLAs, ministers, corporate agencies and so on. She made sure that her activities and policies didn't alienate those who opposed her. By displaying maturity in her interactions and using a direct and focused approach in problem solving, she is an example of a woman from a poor family and marginalized community who has been able to bring people together and demonstrate positive changes in the community and local-self-governance. She highlights some challenges in the system of governance by stating that a strong political will is essential for enabling PRI (Panchayat Raj Institution) to become effective institutions of Local Self Government .She sometimes feels that Pradhan's of Panchayats are becoming mere agents of implementation of government schemes and programs. Autonomy of the PRI (Panchayat Raj Institution)and community needs are compromised due to overpowering and top-down planning instructions of government, delay in release of funds, attitude enforcing common activities to all PRIs(Panchayat Raj Institutions) not as per need of specific Panchayat. A bottom-up approach in PRI(Panchayat Raj Institution) remains challenging. She states that in a democratic ecosystem, political party ideology,affiliation,tagging sometimes affects development of Panchayat and should be avoided to give priority to development of Panchayat. She acknowledges that there are some positive efforts for decentralizing in terms of greater space being given to Panchayats for deciding use of funds. However, due to poor infrastructure and lower capacities of some members of the Panchayat, leaders and functionaries of the Panchayat are not able to leverage it. She shares that Pradhan as an elected representative has several social, physical, moral and development responsibilities towards the Panchayat but do not receive appropriate remuneration and recognition. Pradhan are expected to do wonders and benefit the needy persons in their Panchayat, but the systems of governance remain unchanged,

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rigid, and operationally sluggish since the time of Independence. The Pradhan's role is very demanding, but their compensation does not match even the wage rates of the State and is nowhere close to the compensations, privileges, salary, and honorariums provided to elected representatives at higher levels such as the Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs). Pradhan's are expected to work around the clock as volunteers (Lok-seva).

Smt.Savita Choudhary also highlighted major constraint while performing duties which include: -

a) Panchayat is not able to set agenda for development as per felt need in Gram Sabha meetings.
b) Felt need of the common people go into back burner since new GPDP (Gram Panchayat Development Plan) started in Panchayat.
c) Pradhan receive set target from center to implement central sector scheme.
d) Gram Panchayat become mere an implementing agency.
e) Housing scheme does not benefit the beneficiaries due to technicalities (sometimes geo tagging app does not work that's leads to beneficiary's name not uploaded)
f) More than fifty percent beneficiaries are not included in housing scheme.
g) Maximum dependency on Block Office due to heavy bureaucratic intervention in Panchayat work.
h) Contractor for installing solar street light , drainage facility and other technical work decided by the State Government, which further undermine the authority of the Pradhan.

From Smt. Savita Choudhary case study one can say that she has gained self-confidence and self-initiative, she has been able to perform her duties by conducting meetings with Gram Sabha, dealing with administration, she is empowered at home as well with regard to decision making and also has been able to get cooperation of multiple stakeholders and beneficiaries including co-partners. These factors motivating EWRs (Elected Women Representatives) to participate in Panchayat.

CONCLUSION

Although Bihar is the first state to implement 50 percent reservation for women, situation of women is still under the circumference of feudal character. Elected women representative are still facing challenges to perform duties just because of male dominated society and lack of women education. EWR (Elected Women Representative) who have better family background, better education and back up perform better in their duties. This case study shows if women have will for community service, they can perform better and become a role model for other elected women representative who faces challenges in performing role as an EWRs(Elected Women Representatives). Case study also shows the value of networking through which EWR can perform her duties by knowing recent updates of act and rule/policies and better practices.

Currently ,29 Panchayat Development activity are divided into 9 themes as per Gram Panchayat Development Plan and it is oriented towards achievement of Sustainable Development Goal. For the fulfillment of these 9 themes which include poverty free and enhance livelihood village, healthy village, child friendly village, water sufficient village, clean and green village, self-sufficient infrastructure in village, socially just and socially secured village, village with good governance, women friendly village, required large scale women participation and well trained and highly motivated elected women representative to perform in Panchayat. If more and more women leader are engage as Pradhan in Panchayat through institutional help and cooperation, achievement of Sustainable Development Goal become simple and easy.

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