

SOCIAL-OBJECTIVES-LADEN ELECTORAL RULES OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS (PRIS): A POLITICAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

After 73rd and 74th Amendments, panchayats and municipalities were devolved with more and more functions, functionaries and funds. Hence, their electoral politics has grown in importance and became more competitive, violent and expensive. With the constitutional and statutory provisions for the reservations, they have huge scope for social inclusion. But there are social and economic forces with vested interest which try to hamper the effective participation of women and other weaker sections of the society. In this background, the complex implications of the social objectives-laden electoral rules for PRIs have been analysed from the political justice perspective. A brief survey of emerging electoral politics at the grassroots level in different states locates these positively projected norms in their comprehensive context. These add-on provisions for minimum education, two children and toilets result in exclusion of that target group who need inclusion in decision-making the most. The social objectives can be achieved by increasing the bargaining power and agency of women and marginalised social segments, rather than impinging on their democratic rights.

Keywords: Panchayat Raj, PRIs, Electoral Politics, Political Parties, SECs, Two-Child-Norm, Must-have-Toilet Norm

INTRODUCTION:

The Preamble of Indian Constitution envisions of securing of political justice for all its citizens, which implies 'one person, one vote' and right to contest the elections without any discrimination. There are some constitutional and statutory qualifying criteria like minimum age, place of residence, state of mind, etc are to be fulfilled before entering the electoral arena. For contesting any election, one needs to be a voter first without being disqualified on the grounds laid down in Article 326. The Constitutional provisions lay down the norms for qualification and disqualification for the membership of the Parliament (Article 84, Article 102) and those for the state legislatures (Article 173, Article 191). Under these provisions, the Representation of the People Acts, 1950 and 1951 further elaborate and add to the qualifying/disqualifying framework for MPs and MLAs/MLCs. All these norms are quite generic in nature and not rooted in minimum individual achievements and constraints. A detailed analysis of the electoral rules for the local bodies in the matters of qualification/disqualification presents a different picture.

With two Constitutional amendments-namely seventy third and seventy fourth ones, a new layer was added to the Indian federalism at the sub-state level, which also provided a State Election Commission (SEC) for 'the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and for conduct of all elections to the Panchayats'(Article 243K) at the regular intervals of five years.. Here, Article 243F and

Article 243V provide for disqualification for membership of PRIs and that of the municipalities respectively. Under the provisions of these articles, many of the state acts for rural and urban local bodies lay down the qualification norms which are in addition to what are provided for MP and MLAs. It is like a primary class student gets tougher question paper than a secondary level student. The heavier norms at the grassroots level representation are justified on the ground of attaining the social objectives like literacy, toilets in homes, population control, etc, when there is very little to show their linkage with quality of political representation in diverse and unequal social context. These developments need to be analysed in the background of the stiff resistance from the vested interests entrenched in top two levels in devolving the power to the local self-governments after these two constitutional amendments. The story of democratic decentralisation in India is narration of large number of actors with different shades in variegated settings. This story seems to contain several sub-plots with some common happenings of regular elections and reservations for women and marginalised sections of society, but leaving wide variations in terms of empowerment, participation and accountability.

In this article we are trying to capture the complex implications of the social objectives-laden electoral rules for PRIs. Though such additional norms are applicable for the municipal representations too, the rural areas are in more disadvantageous situation than the urban areas. Hence, these norms have potential to debar more number of candidates in the rural areas than the rural areas. The principle of equality in the electoral process demands that how any provision affects at the base level or using Gandhian talisman of recalling last person in last line.

Varied Electoral Settings and Electoral Politics for PRIs:

73rd constitutional amendment provided a common reference framework for the formation, function and funding of PRIs, leaving enough scope for the state level variations in devolutions downward. Afterwards, different states promulgated their Panchayat Raj Acts providing for organisational structure at different levels, elections, reservations, finance, and planning (see Table 1). In the preceding years, several changes were affected by the state governments to make representatives more accountable, increase people's participation, enhance efficiency and empower women.

Table 1: Statewise Panchayati Raj Acts Passed in Conformity with the 73rd Amendment

S.no	State	Year	Name of the State Act
1	Andhra Pradesh	1993	The Andhra Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1993
2	Bihar	1993	The Bihar Panchayati Raj Act 1993
3	Gujarat	1993	The Gujarat Panchayat Act 1993
4	Himachal Pradesh	1994	The Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994
5	Karnatka	1993	The Karnatka Panchayati Raj Act 1993
6	Kerala	1994	The Kerala Panchayati Raj Act 1994
7	Madhya Pradesh	1994	The Madhya Pradesh Panchayat Act 1994
8	Maharashtra	1994	The Bombay Village Panchayats and the Maharashtra Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Smities (Amendment) Act 1994
9	North East i) Assam ii) Tripura iii) Manipur iv) Arunachal Pradesh	1994 1993 1994 1994/ 1997	The Assam Panchayat Act 1994 The Tripura Panchayat Act 1993 The Manipur Panchayati Raj Act 1994 The Arunachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Ordinance 1994/ The Arunachal Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act 1997
10	Orissa	1993	The Orisaa Gram Panchayat, Taluk Panchayats, Zilla Parishads (Amendment) Act, 1993
11	Punjab	1994	The Punjab Panchayati Raj Act 1994
12	Rajasthan	1994	The Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act 1994
13	Tamil Nadu	1994	The Tamil Nadu Panchayati Raj Act 1994
14	Uttar Pradesh	1994	The Uttar Pradesh Panchayat (Amendment) Act 1994
15	West Bengal	1994	The West Bengal Panchayati (Amendment) Act 1994
16	Sikkim	1993	The Sikkim Panchayat Act 1993
17	Haryana	1994	The Haryana Panchayati Raj Act 1994
18	Goa	1994	The Goa Panchayat Raj Act 1994
19	Jharkhand	2001	The Jharkhand Panchayat Raj Act 2001
20	Chhattisgarh	1994	The Chhattisgarh Panchayat Raj Adhiniyam, 1993
21	Uttarakhand	2016	The Uttarakhand Panchayati Raj Act, 2016

Source: B K Chandrashekar (ed), Panchayati Raj in India – Status Report 1999, New Delhi: Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, 2000, p 263 (emphasis added)

There are several studies which conclude that the reservation in PRIs' representations had helped the disadvantaged groups in better access to public goods and services. The constitutional provisions for earmarking certain seats for women, SCs and STs have given more share and assertion to those groups in the process of decision making. The states can make provision for the reservation of seats for OBCs too. The positive correlation between the reservation for women and social change encouraged the central government and subsequently, many state governments to raise the women reservation from one third to half, i.e. 50%. This has increased the number of women representatives in PRIs from around 8 lakh to 14 lakh.

On the basis of a study of two districts of West Bengal and Rajasthan, it was found that the reservation has brought a difference as women and SC representatives had shown greater inclination towards meeting the needs of these sections of the society. The study concludes, "...reservation may be a tool to ensure not only adequate representation but also adequate delivery of local public goods to disadvantaged groups. They fly in the face of scepticism founded on anecdotes or prejudice that women or SCs are not capable of being independent leaders. These results show that, whatever the process underlying the effects may be, women and SC leaders made a difference on the ground." Hence, the grassroots elections acquired additional significance for distributive politics. With growing responsibility and funding for PRIs, the people's interest in the elections for different positions has gained tremendous momentum.

With the Jharkhand cabinet approving two sets of rules to guide the panchayat bodies, the elected members are able to carry out development work. Under the Jharkhand Panchayat Niyamavali, 2011, the elected panchayat members have a direct say in implementing all centrally and state sponsored development schemes. The new rules empower the panchayat members to draw up annual development plans for their respective areas.

In UP, around fifty-two thousand Gram Panchayats had been allocated around five thousand crore rupees under various schemes. In fact, the Gram Pradhan is like a mini chief minister at village level with responsibility of carrying out the jobs of over 32 departments. A plan was prepared to set up mini-secretariats in all the Panchayats in the state. Gram Pradhans were supposed to have their own offices. The State Government planned to cover all panchayats in a phased manner in the next few years. A roadmap prepared for this purpose envisaged to cover nearly 3,000 villages with panchayat secretariats. Rs.303.33 crores was given to the gram panchayat for building mini secretariats. Bihar government also declared to build "Panchayat Bhavan" in every district, which would also function as a rest house.

The Gujarat government has taken the initiative to form planning committees in all the districts to facilitate equitable distribution of water and other natural resources. The planning committees are headed by a cabinet Minister with the chief of the district Panchayat as the vice chairperson and the district collector as co-vice chairperson. In Anand district, Thamna village did a commendable job in terms of self-reliance. The concerted efforts of the village panchayat with extensive cooperation of the villagers brought clean roads, regular electricity supply and better functioning of the schools. This case clearly illustrates the growing importance of the representatives at the panchayat level.

The voters as well as the candidates had been showing increasing stakes in the elections for PRIs. In a state like Karnataka with rich tradition of PRIs, the initial elections during December 1993 had 1239 seats mostly reserved for Backward Casts, SCs, STs and women, which went vacant. Then, there had been substantive reduction in the number of vacant seats in successive elections. The tribal areas in Madhya Pradesh had shown lower voter turnout than the other parts of the state. In February 1994 panchayat elections, the lowest voting percentage was 44.04% in Bastar, 47.09% in Shahdol and 45.32% in Jhabua, whereas non-tribal districts like Durg and Indore had shown 80% and 79.19% voter turnouts respectively. But in a panchayat elections held in Feb, 2015, around 67 per cent voter turnout was registered in Bastar.

Despite increasing trend for voters' turnout, the state like Gujarat has introduced mandatory voting in local elections by bringing the Gujarat local Authorities laws (Amendment) Bill, 2009 amending the Bombay Provincial Municipal Corporation Act 1949 and the Gujarat Panchayat Act 1993. With these statutory provisions, the absence of a voter can be declared as defaulter action and the authorities may initiate the action accordingly. Making such provision in rural setting of India can have many unintended authoritative actions and awareness and educating the voters should be preferred.

Besides the top-down coercive model of Gujarat, the society itself seems to be waking up to the significance of voting and started using the practice of social sanction for making voting compulsory. The experience of Jollopur village in Haryana is an indicator in this direction. The village had a poor track record when it comes to voting. The village had been generally showing indifference to elections. But once the Gram panchayat of Jallopur decided that every voter from the village would exercise her/his right to

franchise. Whosoever failed to show up would have to pay a fine of Rs.100. Jallopur is primarily a village of Dalit where 70% of people in that village were Below the Poverty Line (BPL) families.

Another dimension is growing interest of the political parties in the elections for grassroots institutions of self-government. In 1996 panchayat elections in Tamil Nadu – the first election in post-73rd amendment phase a high voter turnout of around 71.21% was registered, for which the political parties were given the credit. "Considering that elections to all positions were on a party basis except that of VP members, a number of political parties were also in the fray. ...Almost all the major political parties were involved in these elections reflecting the wide interest in the revival of democracy at the grassroots." In Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the party affiliations are, not formally part of the gram panchayat level electoral processes, while the party participation is allowed at Zilla and Taluk panchayats. In Himachal Pradesh, the party-less elections are held at Gram Panchayat and Panchayat Samiti levels. Despite formal renunciations of their party affiliations, there were very few candidates who were independent. A study of the five districts of Karnataka concluded, "The key finding is that a majority of the contesting candidates had identified themselves with one or the other political party. Both the contestants and the political parties have incentives in revealing their political party affiliation to the voters. The contesting candidates managed to enlist the support of political leaders for not only canvassing but also obtaining monetary and non-monetary support."

There have been concerns over holding elections at the Gram Panchayat level with party symbols allotted by the Election Commission of India. Should political parties be allowed to participate in the local bodies elections with

which Gandhi and Jayparakash Narayan disagreed? The multi-partisanship in a small body like Gram Panchayat will make it divided, fractious and weak and therefore, inefficient. As Kerala society is sharply polarized on political lines, corruption by way of political favoritism to promote petty party interests takes a high toll. The partisan attitude of political parties stands in the way of consensus, cooperation and involvement. West Bengal experience also shows that strong party control over decision-making in PRIs results in highly fragmented rural society. Large number of violent incidents in 2008 panchayat elections of West Benagal led to such a comment 'The rural subalterns, having high stakes in the panchayats and deeply divided over party affiliations, are drawn in these battles and become victims of party-led violence. In fact, they turn into fighters for this or that party, fight against each other and kill their class-brethren, burning houses, raping women and what not. Thus the sacrosanct institutions of panchayat have turned into tools in the hands of the power-mongers to mobilise rural people in their quest for more power and ultimate supremacy in the state politics.'

Growing involvement of political parties had made elections at the grassroot level more expensive and the expenditure limits were flouted with impunity. For instance, Odisha had fixed the limit of expenditure of Rs. 30,000 and Rs. 75,000 for Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti and zilla Parishad members respectively. But following scene of panchayat election makes it amply clear that such limits remain confined to rule books only: 'It should be noted that legally the gram panchayat elections should be held on a non-party basis. However, involvement of political parties in the campaign was visible everywhere as it happened in the past. In almost all places, the legislators were openly supporting their candidates. ...On the days of voting, most candidates were seen offering meals and tambula (gifts) to the voters

to woo them. In the camps of some candidates, the festivities matched only those of a marriage ceremony.'

In such a scenario, the competitiveness in the grassroots electoral politics has become very intense and hence, role of SECs as an umpire has become important. It was September 1994 when the State Election Commission (SEC) was constituted in Andhra Pradesh. Then it conducted the elections for 21, 943 Gram Panchayats, 1093 Mandal Parishads and 22 Zilla Parishads, which was by and large successful barring few incidents of electoral malpractices and group clashes. The Governor of Bihar was entrusted with appointing the SEC, which has the duty to prepare of electoral roll and to conduct the elections for panchayats and municipalities.

Besides conducting the elections for the institutions of local self-government, SEC in Kerala has also been vested with the tasks of delimitation of a panchayat and rotating the reserved posts and panchayats. Similar is the powers and functions of SEC in Maharashtra and UP. In Kerala, the elections for the urban and rural local bodies are held simultaneously and SEC has been conducting successfully.

In Madhya Pradesh, SEC was constituted in May 1994. After that, direct elections for panch and sarpanch of Gram Panchayats and members of Janpad and Zilla Panchayats have been conducted by it. Janpadas and Zilla Panchayats Presidents are elected by the members of those bodies from amongst their members respectively, and these indirect elections have been kept out of the purview of SECs. This is a deviation from the Article 243K(I), which vests the authority of conducting all elections to PRIs in SEC. Instead of SEC, the state government retains the power of delimitation of panchayat constituencies and their reservation and thus making this whole process susceptible to political pulls and pressures. In case of Odisha also, the job of delimitation of panchayat

constituencies is not done by the SEC and remains within the executive jurisdiction of the state government. Draft Model Panchayat Election Rule 2011 of Ministry of Panchayati Raj has vested the power of delimitation in the District Magistrate under the superintendence, direction and control of SECs.

Thus variations in the jurisdiction of and statutory protection for SECs across the states are evident. They need to be developed on the pattern of Election Commission of India as the vices like influence of money and muscle power, caste and patriarchy inflicting the local level elections put them in the league of higher level elections.

Social Objectives through PRIs’ Electoral Rules:

With the constitutional mandate for regular elections of panchayats and municipalities, these elections are becoming barometer to gauge the popular mood at the grassroots level. Even national media started according respectable coverage to election process at the grassroots level. The mainstream media had been giving favourable spin to new qualifying criteria for candidates like must-have-toilet and two children norms, which needs to be examined from the point of participatory democracy and social change.

The two-child norm for the panchayat elections was first adopted by Rajasthan and then other states like Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Chhatisgarh adopted this. But National Population Policy-2000 does not propose two-child norm. Two child norm has also been criticised as an extension of anti-democratic population policies. Questions had been raised on making the fertility a marker of citizenship. Generally, socially and economically deprived groups register higher fertility rates due to lack of awareness, difficulty in accessing birth control measures and increasing number of

working hands for more income. In such a situation, these groups are at the receiving end of such a norm. There is a need to have a proper insight of relationship between population and resources in Indian context, which has serious democratic implications. As we can see, in the first seven months of 2009, 14 sarpanches of Rajasthan were suspended for violating two child norms. A study conducted by Mahila Chetana Manch of Bhopal on the two-child norm found that 54 per cents of disqualified candidates under this provision were illiterate or had primary education and only 3 per cent were having university education. About 16% read up to middle level and about 27% upto higher secondary level. Majority of such disqualified candidates (around 78%) were SCs, STs and OBCs. 70% of the affected persons had annual income of Rs 30000/- and 30% were in the lowest income group of Rs 11000/- per annum.

There are problems in tagging such objectives onto the reservation policy. In West Bengal, both the women and the men pradhans have more than two children. Similarly, Children per woman for Rajasthan are 2.6 (see Table 3). The women in our society have less control over fertility choices and hence this two-child-norm reduces women’s agency. In turn, this may result in increasing growth rate of the population and may debar the genuine candidates from contesting the elections.

Table 2: Number of Children and Literacy of Village Pradhan in West Bengal

S No	Dependent Variable	Mean of Reserved Gram Panchayat	Mean of Unreserved Gram Panchayat
1	Number of Children	2.45	2.50
2	Literacy	0.80	0.98
3	Number of Household assets	1.72	2.36

Source: Based on Table No 6 in Raghabendra Chattopadhyay, Esther Duflo, ‘Impact of Reservation in Panchayati Raj: Evidence From a Nationwide Randomised Experiment’,

Economic and Political Weekly, vol 39 (9), February 28, 2004, p.984

Hence, T M Dak on the basis of his extensive study suggests that ‘...the question of achieving population goals through panchayati raj has become quite controversial; it no longer remains a population question alone; rather, it has acquired a sociocultural, economic and political significance. In view of the sensitivity associated with the two-child norm and some states have already retraced their step despite a favourable view expressed by the apex court.’

In addition to two child norms, the grassroots electoral rules were amended to stop public defecation. In 2017, Maharashtra introduced the conditionality of must-have-toilet for contesting the local bodies’ polls. Before this Karnataka also did it, which was challenged in the Court. The court gave relaxation up to 9 February 2000 and the state government has enforced this decision 2011 onwards. So, candidates keen to contest the elections have to ensure that they have toilets in their houses to avoid disqualification in the states with ‘must-have-toilet’ norm. Gujarat also enforced this norm from 2014. The Panchayati Raj Act currently in vogue in Uttarakhand was brought in 2016 with a mandatory qualifying condition for a member of Gram Panchayat to have a toilet in her/his home.

Operationalizing a welfare provision amidst stark poverty in rural India, the electoral politics especially for SCs, STs, OBCs, EWS, women and minority becomes exclusionary. In rural areas of Maharashtra, only 38 per cent of households have toilets and only 32.6 per cent of SC and 21.09 per cent of ST households have toilets within their premises. This figure of 2011 Census makes around one third of population ineligible for contesting the elections. Similar is the situation in Rajasthan. As per the Swachhhta Status Report (April, 2016), there were about 73 per cent people in rural and 14.2 per cent in urban areas who did not have any

latrine facility in Rajasthan. Due to this, 66 per cent of rural households in the state were forced to go for open defecation.

The states like Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Haryana have made certain level of education compulsory for contesting different level of elections in PRIs. The Rajasthan Panchyati Raj Amendment Act 2015 laid down the qualification for those contesting Panchayat elections: a minimum class VIII pass for women and SC category, and class X for general category candidates. The criterion of basic minimum educational qualification was first introduced in Rajasthan. In 2017, Maharashtra also joined Rajasthan as minimum educational qualification of 7th standard was made essential basis to contest Panchayat elections. This provision excluded more than half of the rural population in Maharashtra from contesting elections.

There were many posts in Panchayats in Haryana and Rajasthan, which could not be filled up owing to this criterion of minimum educational qualification. It was observed that most of such vacant posts for village pradhans were the ones which were reserved for ST women. According to the Census data of 2011, the basic educational qualification criterion debarred more than 90 per cent of ST women of 20 years of age from contesting panchayat elections. Some Rajasthani villages had very low female literacy rate, which left not a single woman to contest Panchayat elections. In such villages the female aspirants did not have education of eighth class making them to sit outside of the race.

Table 3: Education and Total Fertility Rate Data

S No	Particulars	Rural Rajasthan (NFHS 4)
1	Rural Women literate	49.8 %
2	Women with 10 or more years of schooling (%)	18.8 %
3	Total Fertility Rate (Children per Women) in Rural Areas	2.6

Source: Nibedita Phukan, Policy Brief: Rajasthan, New Delhi: Development Alternatives, June 2018, p2

Findings from Political Justice Perspective:

The Constitution of India envisioned of panchayati raj institutions pursuing the objectives of economic development and social justice. It provided not only for elections at regular intervals, but also made provisions for representational and inclusive elected components. This has substantially increased the number of women representative and representatives from marginalised sections of the society, but their effective participation is yet to be achieved owing to household engagements, economic difficulties and social constraints. In such a scenario, the state initiatives for social objective-oriented electoral rules will further complicate their challenges. These add-on provisions for minimum education, two children and toilets result in exclusion of that target group who need inclusion in decision-making the most. The social objectives can be achieved by increasing the bargaining power and agency of women and marginalised social segments, rather than impinging on their democratic rights.

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