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The New Faces of Women Empowerment in India

Debdatta Bhaduri

Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science,

Sonarpur Mahavidyalaya

(University of Calcutta)

Kolkata-700149

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Abstract:

That women have lived a marginalised life for years is a cliché. The march of human civilization for centuries remained silent over the women's causes. It is noteworthy to say that women mostly have a peripheral existence in the developing countries where they are faced with a variety of economic, cultural and social challenges for their survival. The situation is not very different in India; especially in the rural areas. The Indian Government adopted various constitutional measures and five-year plans for women's inclusion through Democratic decentralisation. These efforts could not bring any substantial and perceptible changes in women's status mostly in the last two decades. On the other hand, a small group of subaltern women outside the centre of power has emerged as the champions of their own causes cutting across the caste or gender barriers. Jal Sahelis and Paani Panchayats in Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh exemplify the claim.

Keywords: Democratic decentralisation, Political empowerment, Women's inclusion, Subaltern women, Jal sahelis (water buddies), Paani Panchayat.

Introduction:

The march of human civilization for centuries remained silent over the women's cause. Even the French Revolution while proclaiming rights for men and the citizen in 1789, excluded rights for women. The demand for the political equality started in the 18th century Western Europe and North America. New Zealand became the first country to accede to the voting right of women in 1883 and unleashed the wave of legitimising women's rights across the states of the world.

Yet, even at the onset of the 21st century in a globalised world, the United Nations Organizations (UNO) observes in 1997 that if development is not engendered, it is endangered. Women who constitute half of the world's population still remain excluded mostly from the developmental process. The global concern for women's political participation which remained quite ignorable and marginalised so far was visible, when UNO declared the decade as the Women Development decade. This was followed by the Nairobi Conference in 1985 which highlights the need for taking up steps by the participating countries to ensure women's political participation through reservation of seats in all elections.

It is noteworthy to say that women mostly had a peripheral existence in the developing countries where they are faced with a variety of economic cultural and social challenges for their survival. The situation is not very different in India especially in the rural areas where women play a significant role in the economic regeneration; still they are worst victims of social and political prejudices.

As there was the ground realisation of the fact that any development program or growth in economy can only be successful with the involvement of women. The Indian Government adopted various measures as constitutional measures and five-year plans for women's inclusion. Subsequently, the different planned documents exhibited a shift of emphasis on women from welfare to development and towards empowerment finally, by means of imparting education, skill, health care and employment generation.

The most important outcome in the history of local self-government and women's empowerment at the grass-root level is the 73rd amendment of the constitution of 1992, which legalised Gandhi's idea not only of village Panchayat, but also his understanding that so long the women did not take part in public life, there could not be any salvation for the country. This Amendment also provided for reservation of one - third seats for women in the local bodies at rural levels. This reflects the paradigmatic shift of Indian state's approach towards women. Consequently, the ninth five-year plan (1997-2002) and the Tenth five-year plan (2002-2007), declared empowerment of women as its objective. This was also shows the beginning of various women centric activities and the rise of women's self-help group. These self-help groups of women addressed different various socio-economic issues faced by women in rural areas – sanitation, economic empowerment, domestic violence and so on. But tackling the water crisis through formation of small groups of women, especially of Dalit class presents a novel aspect of women's movement in India. The present paper tries to analyse this journey of 'Paani Panchayat' by women in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh as the agent of social change and establishing women's first right to water in various sections. This investigation entails an explorative research orientation based on primarily secondary data.

Women and Their Rights

The constitution of India embodies the ideals of an egalitarian society by establishing liberty, equality justice and fraternity for all irrespective of caste, creed, sex or religion. It leaves scope for positive discrimination in favour of women and socially and educationally backward classes. Art-14 ensures gender equality. Art-15 prohibits discriminations on grounds of sex. Art-16 provides for equal opportunity in public appointments. Art 39(a) empowers the state to provide adequate means of livelihood to men and women. (Basu 88-91). The constitution of India finally by the 73rd and 74th Amendment, incorporated not less than one-third including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. This would encourage democratic participation, training and consequent decentralization in administrative authority.

The Experience

This was the beginning of a historic voyage. There was a 36.7 percent woman in all panchayat bodies in 2006, the highest being 42.9 percent in Karnataka (Panchayat raj Update, 2007). This was a means to achieve the ultimate end of greater women's involvement in the decision – making process in governance and inclusive development of the society. However, the findings of the Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) conducted on the experiences of women panchayat members with a focus on women as Pradhan in six states, namely: Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, present a contrasting picture of women leadership in rural India. It shows that only 20 to 40 percent of women are literate. Less than 20 percent of them are heads of the domestic households. About 40 percent of the members work in fields. About 40 percent stood for elections on their husbands' insistence (Participatory Research in New Delhi).

The study showed that though Gram Sabha meetings were rarely held, in those meetings too, women related issues seldom came up. But in Kerala and Madhya Pradesh women have been able to strike a chord. Members of the Gram Sabha felt that women were more sensitive to the causes of the marginalised and worked for an inclusive development. The National Commission of women has conducted a survey in some states viz. Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Tamilnadu, and Uttar Pradesh in 2001 and has reported that women's political participation has enhanced the status of women at home and outside. (National Commission on Women, New Delhi, 2001)

But there are other observations also which highlight the contrasting sides of the story. In Kerala, the situation was severe with women having multiple roles as employee, housewife, and member/president of Panchayat (Dutta 40-49). The main factor which prevents them from taking and implementing decisions is over politicisation, interference from husbands, fathers and brothers. In Rajasthan, the husbands in some cases were the de-facto candidates in panchayat elections. "The conference of women panches of four districts of Udaipur, Rajsamand, Pali and Dungarpur held in November 1999, brought the non-cooperative tactics of male panches. But these did not prevent women panches" (Panchayati Raj updates 1999).

In Uttar Pradesh which remains a caste based agrarian economy till date, a few case studies reveal a diverse picture. While for Meera Jadav, in Ghazipur district, it is a success story, "Sudha Pai's study in Meerut district tends to show that illiteracy and dominance of husbands impede women's participation." (Sudha Pai 1998). Madhya Pradesh witnesses an avid aversion of the people towards the elected female representatives in areas marked by casteism, low level of literacy where the Dalits become the easy target. "In Tamilnadu, for example, till August 2000 as many as 96 village panchayat presidents were removed by District collectors, 66 of whom are women....Dalit women Presidents are forced to act under the control of the dominant caste of the area." (Dutta 35) Thus, it can be commented that political empowerment of women is constrained by limitations. These factors involve the existing patriarchal structure, illiteracy, feudal mind set, political corruptions, lack of

solidarity among women participants, prevailing social norms and customs various other socio-political issues.

Yet, there still remains the hope of setting new trends in participatory politics and women's empowerment. The last decade witnessed the rise of many self-help groups encouraging and involving women for their own emancipation. Sometimes the indomitable urge for survival compels the women to exert their powers in way which becomes exemplary for generations to come. Their efforts cut across the lines of caste, creed, or religious divisions for greater freedom and challenge the patriarchal hierarchy of the society. The panchayati raj institutions (PRI) and political representations of women become just an instrument for legitimising the rightful claims of the so called illiterate women of rural India.

Paani Panchayats and Jal Saheli

It is a story of Imrati Pal, a resident of Motho, a tiny settlement in Lalitpur district of Bundelkhand in Uttar Pradesh who would trek everyday 12 km with a pitcher on her head to fetch water for her family in the scorching sun. Water, the invaluable gift of nature is most precious for the villagers in the region of Bundelkhand affected with drought, famine and threatening health diseases. (TOI).

Imrati set out to dig a well with the help of two other women. They work heavily on the rough terrain lifting boulders. The villagers along with their husbands remained just onlookers. Suddenly after three months, they struck water and then men and women, cutting across even the caste lines quietly came to lend a helping hand. "Now there exists three check dams for rain water harvesting, half a dozen hand pumps in Motho." (TOI). These Jal Sahelis (Water Buddies) have finally succeeded in beating nature.

Women in Bundelkhand, even walked 8 km everyday to fetch water which deteriorated their health further as they were held primarily responsible for getting water for the family. They had to wait hours for a pot of water from a hand-pump as the number of functioning hand-pumps decreased with the onset of summer Eighteen year old Anjana Kushwaha recalls that she would get up in the dawn to walk to the nearest well for water before going to school and even after coming back from the school. Now with the improvement of the water status, and by the collaborative activities of the Jal Sahelis through Paani Panchayats, she has greater time for studies. According to India's official Ground Water Resources Assessment, more than 1/6th of the country's ground water supply is over used.(TOI)

Consequently, drought has become a regular phenomenon in the Bundelkhand region. During summer every year, water scarcity hits epidemic proportions leading to death and diseases. Though the central and the state governments often come out with drought relief measures, their attitudinal indifference does not bring about any perceptible changes in water situation. This often results in deserting the village for lively hood by leaving behind the elderly and dependent ones for good. The first Paani Panchayat was formed in Jalaun district in 2011. In 2011, women from 60 Gram Panchayats of the three backward districts of

Bundelkhand region, namely Jalaun, Hamirpur and Lalitpur join together to form Paani Panchayats (water council) in their villages. Their endeavour has become a role model for effecting local self-governance to address scarcity and employment problems in rural areas. The Paani Panchayat Concept was part of a project to establish women's first right to water. Jalaun based Parmarth Seva Sangathan, a non-profit organization executed the project with aid from European Union. (Hindustan Times).

The idea mooted was to accelerate and strengthen women's participation in decision making process on vital issues of water, livelihood and security in the Bundelkhand region. Women of a village cutting across religious and caste hierarchies form a Paani Panchayat to focus on the water issues of village community. A Paani Panchayat works through meetings of its members, campaigns awareness and persuades the village Pradhan and officials to get work done. The two best members of each Paani Panchayat are nominated as Jal Sahelis for that village. Thus a Paani Panchayat led by the Jal Sahelis work as the pressure group to deal with the water issues of the local administration as well as the Panchayats. Dalit women whose voices were not heard so long and whose democratic rights for life remained perhaps a passé for prevailing social prejudices have acquired a new identity and respect as Jal Sahelis through Paani Panchayats in today's Bundelkhand region. Today there are more than 300 women as Jal Sahelis, across hundred and fifty villages, who have been working with water management to build new check dams, dig wells, install hand pumps and adopt various water conservatory methods.(TOI)

Feminist Overview

Feminism surfaced as a term long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanded a reversal of the system based on differentiation. Many women's rights organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s did not call themselves feminists. It is only recently that all sorts of women's rights groups are labelled as feminist initiatives. However as Delmar observes, Feminism cannot be established as a field, but cannot claim women as its domain. Accordingly, feminism can claim its own history, its own practices, its own ideas, but feminists can make no claim to an exclusive interest in or copy right over problems affecting women.

According to Jane Freedman, "although there is not one feminism but a multiplicity of feminism and although these feminists are product of many different women in a variety of social positions, not all of these feminisms have enjoyed the same prominence."(Freedman 5) Some feminists feel that 'first wave' and 'second wave' feminist movements and theories were overtly dominated by white, middle-class women who were theorizing and generalizing from the perspective of their own personal experience. These Eurocentric feminist theories ignored and undervalued the lives and experiences of women in the third world.

Joyawardena observes that women in the third world countries have developed their own indigenous feminist movements with their own specific goals, especially in India. As Uma Narayan addresses, (Narayan 13), "Issues that feminist groups in India have politically engaged with include problems of dowry murder and dowry related harassment of women,

...issues relating to women's poverty, health and reproduction and issues of ecology and communalism that affect women's lives...Indian feminism for instance is clearly a response to issues especially confronting many Indian." Thus, third world women, more specifically the women of the developing world are often shown as the victims of the patriarchal structure and their contribution as an agency is frequently ignored.

Another theory that has come up in the feminist domain is the concept of eco-feminism. It is the consequence of the growth of world economy and the application of eco-centric model of development as a result of destruction of world's environment and ecosystem. Vandana Shiva has argued that ecology is a specific feminist issue. She argues that before the rise of Western colonialism and Western science, indigenous people throughout the world had relatively close and harmonious relation with the natural world. Natural forces were typically seen as feminine because they represented the 'generative powers of fertility and birth' [Shiva]. Hence, if the world's ecology and biodiversity have to be maintained, it is imperative to take into account women's wisdom and enterprise.

An observation

The poor women from primarily the poor districts of Lalitpur, Jalaun and Hamirpur in Bundelkhand region have to bear the brunt of the water scarcity which often has a toll on the health of these fragile, frail weakest sections of the community. These women have remained mostly illiterate, poor, fragmented on caste lines and beyond the boundaries of so called political empowerment through Panchayats.

But long daily treks of water, continued indifference and uncompassionate, callous attitude of the local and state administration, finally led to the rise of new dawn, a kind of new awareness among these under privileged women to fight for their own cause. As mere constitutional rights or provisions for empowerment remained insufficient, these women as representing new faces of today's modern India became torchbearers in establishing women's first right to water. The fragmented rural society based on gender, caste or religion could no longer arrest the tremendous potential of women's prowess exerted through Paani Panchayats and Jal Sahelis.

Their journey moves on the road to greater freedom for themselves. Philosophically and intellectually, it denotes the growth of 'power within power'.(Shefali 62) This power is about "inner resources", the power which is within the individual and makes self – controlled, tolerant, patient and tranquil and is being used for constructive purposes in this regard. Jal Sahelis thus become the real agencies of social change and transformation even being far from the core of institutionalised political authority. In fact, their endeavours bear a testimony to Gandhi's idea of village Swaraj. The Paani Panchayats mostly constituted by the Dalit women of the region challenge not only the prevalent patriarchy but also its off shoots like caste and religion. They clearly outline their future vision and goal where their only concern remains to reduce water scarcity, increase access to safe drinking water, improve sanitation facilities and most importantly establishing women's 'first right to water'. Political ambitions for them take a back seat while socio economic issues occupy the centre stage, for

e.g. food security, sustainable agriculture; safety nets become the newer domain for organised mobilisation.

The Paani Panchayats along with their fire brand Jal Sahelis move on to carry their struggle for water even by involving the institutionalised support system, like the Panchayats and district administration. Thus, Jal Sahelis have become the true soldiers of a peaceful revolution and the champions of women empowerment, cutting across caste and religious lines. This also bears a testimony to the indigenous race and culture specific claim of feminism as against Eurocentric feminism. Jal Sahelis and Paani Panchayats stand as the new apostle of pluralist democracy and serve as new agencies of social change. Viewed from the angle of eco-feminism, the movement of the subaltern women for their first right to water and water management reinforces women's expertise and priorities in deciding and diverting nature's most important resource, water. These case studies also deserve attention of the academicians and theorists to the explorations of the new found identities of these subaltern women in present India in particular and developing economies in general..

Conclusion

Thus, Jal Sahelis have already unleashed a new era of epitomized consciousness for greater social equality and development. There are millions of subaltern women who still remain unheard so far. Sometimes, a tiny corner of daily news reveals the plight of these common, oppressed victims of patriarchy. There are enough evidences of growing women's movements for greater equality in other parts of India, e.g. the movement by female tea estate employees in Munnar, Kerala in 2015. These mobilisations definitely open the door for a new dawn in the horizon which will further achieve the constitutional aspirations of gender justice and democratic equality.

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