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Rotation of Panchayat Seats Between Men and Women

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Why in News

The Haryana government is planning to bring a Bill to provide **50:50 reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)** for men and women candidates, and rotate the seats between male and female representatives after each term.

Key Points

- Men and women will be able to contest panchayat polls under the **odd-even formula**. This will be implemented for sarpanches and members of village wards, block samitis and zila parishads.
- **Benefit:** This will ensure equal opportunities for men and women, and women from all constituencies will have fair share in terms of reservation.
- **Limitations:** Policy of reservation for only one term and rotation of reserved seats and posts of chairperson can **hinder the consolidation of leadership qualities** among women representatives as it takes time for them to learn the skills of handling and negotiating various conflicting interests within the panchayat.
 - To deal with this issue, some states like Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha and Karnataka have made provisions for **two term reservation of seats at PRIs**.
- Haryana previously enacted **Haryana Panchayati Raj (Amendment) Act, 2015** laying down eligibility criteria to be able to contest Panchayat elections in the state.
 - It included **disqualification** in case of **non-completion of minimum educational criteria** (like class X pass for general category and Class 8th for SC), **non-payment of arrears and debts** to co-operative banks or electricity bills, and **not having functional toilets** at home.
 - The Supreme Court upheld this decision arguing that prescription of an educational qualification is not irrelevant for better administration. Also, the criteria of insolvency and toilets will encourage good practices among legislators.

- **Constitutional Provisions for Women Representation in PRIs:**
 - The **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992** mandates **33.3% reservation** for women in PRIs across the country.
 - The 73rd Amendment envisages the **Gram Sabha** as the foundation of the Panchayat Raj System to perform functions and powers entrusted to it by the State Legislatures.
 - This has been increased to **50% reservation** in several states like Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar etc.
 - Out of the 30.41 lakh elected representatives of PRIs, 13.74 lakh (**45.2%**) are women.
 - **Article 15 (3)** to the Constitution of India empowers the State to make **special provisions for women**.
 - **Article 243D** provides that **one-third of the total number of seats and offices** of the Chairpersons in PRIs at each level shall be reserved for women to be allotted by **rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat**.
Such reservations of seats and offices of the chairpersons for women are also within the reservations for SCs and STs in all three tiers of PRIs.
 - In order to bring about 50% reservation for women in Panchayats in all States, the **110th Constitution Amendment Bill** was introduced in the Lok Sabha in **2009**, but it was **not passed** despite being tabled several times.
- **Challenges Before Women in PRIs**
 - **Patriarchy:** Many women are not allowed to contest elections and many continue to work as proxies for their male family members. Their male co-workers show **insensitivity** and may refuse to cooperate. Burden of **household responsibilities, purdah (veil) system and domestic violence** negatively affect their functioning.
 - **Inadequate Capacities:** Majority of women representatives enter into public life for the first time and do **not have enough knowledge and skills** to handle affairs of panchayats. Training programmes conducted by government training agencies are unable to cover all elected representatives in time.
 - **Violent Opposition:** Women often face **more resistance from the community** if they want to take bold steps. They are also subjected to violence from powerful elements of the society.
 - **Two Child Norm:** A few States like **Odisha and Rajasthan have the two child norm** for contesting panchayat elections. In rural areas women hardly have any say in the number of children in the family and such laws restrict their entry into panchayats.
 - **Caste System:** Hierarchical caste system in rural India makes it difficult for women from SC and ST communities to work independently and effectively.
 - **Lack of Women at Other Levels:** Lack of women coworkers and at higher administrative level also hinders the free functioning of women representatives.

- **Efforts by Government to Promote Women in PRIs:** The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) has been making continuous efforts by launching and implementing various schemes for capacity building of women representatives in PRIs, like
 - **Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA)**
 - **RGSA** was launched in 2018 for developing and strengthening the capacities of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) for rural local governance to become more responsive towards **local development needs**, preparing the **participatory plans** that leverage technology, efficient and **optimum utilization of available resources** for realizing sustainable solutions to local problems linked to **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.
 - It included rewards for ensuring women participation in PRIs
 - **Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP)**

Some of the **key aspects of GPDP guidelines that are relevant to Women Empowerment include** proactive participation of women in budgeting, planning, implementation and monitoring of GPDP and convening Mahila Sabhas prior to the general Gram Sabhas and their inclusion in Gram Sabhas and GPDP.
 - **Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyan (PMEYSA)**

It was implemented from the year 2007-08 till 2012-13 with the broad objective of empowerment of Elected Women & Youth Representatives of Panchayats.
 - Recently, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has directed all the States and Union Territories to organise **Special Gram Sabhas and Mahila Sabhas (Women's Assemblies)** in all **Gram Panchayats**

Way Forward

- The current proposal is a welcome step. However, the government must bear in mind that equality in representation is not enough to ensure socio-political equity among genders, as the relatively disadvantaged position of women must be taken into account.
- Increasing women in PRIs will increase the probability of their better **representation in parliament**, which as of now is only 14%. To further promote women participation in PRIs, emphasis must be made for gender sensitization of male elected representatives and functionaries of PRIs.

- In capacity building of women representatives, governments must also invite and involve civil society organizations, women's groups, academic institutions, corporate social responsibility foundations and also international organizations like UNWomen. A **multi-stakeholder, collaborative, multi-pronged, systematic effort** to enhance the capacities of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) are required.

Source: IE