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Mains Practice Questions

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Q. What do you understand by the term 'sarpanch pati'? Examine the reasons and impact of such culture. (150 words)

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Approach

- Briefly introduce the phenomenon of Sarpanch pati.
- Describe the reasons behind emergence of this phenomenon.
- Describe the impact of this phenomenon.

Introduction

- Through 73rd constitutional amendment, one third seats in Panchayats were reserved for women. A number of states raised the quantum of reserved seats to fifty percent. This was aimed at empowering women and ensuring their participation in political process and decision making at grass root level.
- However, due to poor socio-economic status of women and prevailing patriarchal set-up, the intended benefit of emergence of women leadership at Panchayat level was not fully realized. The effective political power and decision making is wielded by husbands of elected women representatives. This phenomenon is referred to as 'sarpanch pati'.

Body

Reasons for emergence of phenomenon of 'sarpanch pati'

- **Poor social status of women:** Women in general have poor access to education, they are restricted to domestic spaces, they lack economic independence, they are not allowed participation in decision making at family level. This situation of lower social status results in them being mere 'titular heads' and hampers their ability to challenge their husbands. In most cases, such "takeovers" have happened without the wife's consent.
- **Lack of skills:** Raising the reservation for women to fifty per cent without showing any concern or efforts for their capacity building, training or inculcating confidence have led to such situation.
- **Social barriers due to traditional society:** Indian society in villages is still traditional and conservative e.g. in rural areas tradition of parda or veil is very strong especially North Indian states, women are discouraged in public spaces, even government officials at local level avoid talking to women due to conservative outlook. The veil, when imposed on women, severely hinders their public participation. This gives de facto control to Husbands in day to day activities of panchayats. Even in Gram Sabha meetings Husbands of elected representative take charge. Further, women are expected to fulfill their role of managing household chores.

- **Absence of government initiative:** Despite this widespread phenomenon, government failed to act against the practice, either through a strong deterrence through law or through public awareness.

Impact of phenomenon of 'Sarpanch Pati'

- **Failure to empower women:** This phenomenon hinders the intended empowerment of women which was one of the aims of 73rd constitutional amendments through reservation of seats. In terms of social status of women the status-quo is maintained.
- **Poor implementation of law:** This phenomenon effectively manipulates the law effectively preventing its implementation in letter and spirit. The rule of law in such situation is casualty to social prejudices against women.
- **Lack of opportunity in decision making:** this phenomenon reduces women's ability to participate in decision making at village level.

Conclusion

- Reservation of seats in Panchayats was revolutionary step for the empowerment of women. However, for this to be effective government should address the phenomenon of 'sarpanch pati' through a effective law by outlawing such practice.
- Further additional work is needed on capacity building of women in matters of governance, raising society's awareness about women rights and sensitizing bureaucracy about importance of women participation at panchayat level.