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Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and empowerment of weaker sections: A review

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Abstract

Panchayats are the primary unit of self-governance, development and empowerment of weaker sections at the village level. It is considered as an agency of democracy, development and inclusion of weaker sections. The 73rd constitutional amendment has opened space for participation of weaker sections in the structure of local governance. It has ensured their representation in Panchayats at village level. It does not ensure their qualitative participation in the process of decision-making and exercising power at the village level. Attempt is made to analyze as to how and to what extent the weaker sections are participating in the process of decision-making and exercising power at Panchayat level.

Keywords: Decentralisation, democracy, development, representation, participation, weaker sections and empowerment

1. Introduction

The institution of Panchayati Raj is approached in variety of ways. In initial decades of development planning in India, the Panchayati Raj is considered as a grassroots institution for facilitating community participation in development process at the village level. PRIs are treated as an agency of rural development for implementing developmental work initiated from the above at the village level. It is a fundamental departure from the original intent of the institution of self-rule. However, the ambit and scope of PRIs have widened over the years of its establishment. Widening of the scope of the institution also gets reflected in available literature on various dimensions of PRIs.

If we glance at the literature on PRIs we come across the fact that the focus of studies and research on PRIs in initial decades is confined mainly to its role in rural development and community participation in development work at the village level. The scholars and researchers capture the instrumental value of PRIs. It is mainly the early 1980s that marked a shift in the thinking about the Panchayati Raj. Under the dispensation of new thinking, the institution of PRIs registered its presence as an institution of self-rule, self-government, participatory governance, democracy and institutional form of local governance. These thematic concerns are reflected in the literature of that period.

Despite a significant shift in the thinking, PRIs are not treated as an agency of empowerment of weaker sections. It is hardly recognised that the institution can introduce new dynamics of power relations at the rural level. The concern of empowerment of weaker sections through PRIs appeared as passing reference even in the deliberations and Reports of the committees and commissions. The potential of PRIs as an agency of empowerment of weaker sections remains almost unrecognised till the enactment of the 73rd amendment of the Constitution. As a natural corollary, studies and researches linking PRIs as an agency of empowerment of weaker sections are meagre. If we map out the studies and literature on the theme the point gets substantiated.

2. Panchayati Raj before 73rd amendment

Among many scholarly works available on issue during the initial three decades of PRIs, the book titled *Panchayati Raj* by R.B. Jain (1981), needs special mention. The book captures the majors concerns of the period and covers various aspects of working of PRIs.

Out of sixteen papers included in the book the first six papers mainly focuses on administrative decentralisation and development. The next two papers highlight the relation

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of officials and non-officials and simultaneously analyses the role of political parties. The next two papers examine the aspect of personnel management. The subsequent section has four papers which trace the cause of decline of PRIs and suggestions to remodel PRIs. The fifth section has two papers which analyses the role of PRIs as the agency of Integrated Rural Development ^[1].

The book captures the concerns raised about the institution. The book raises two significant issues. It advocates for the constitutional status of PRIs and highlights the importance of social justice committee in safeguarding the interest of weaker sections that is raised by Ashok Mehta Committee (1978).

3. Panchayati Raj after 73rd amendment

A large number of literature produced before the 73rd Act period considered PRIs as an agency of democracy and development. The focus of studies and research in the post 73rd Act period provide additional focus on democracy and development along with empowerment of weaker sections.

In the post 73rd amendment period *Status of Panchayati Raj in the States and Union Territories of India* (2000), may be termed as the most important book as it tries to trace the historical evolution, socio-economic profile and function of PRIs in the pre and post 73rd amendment in the states and union territories of India. Articles of the book on a given state may be classified into two sections. In the first section attempt is made to trace historical evolution and status of Panchayat in the post-independence period. It tries to locate period of establishment, period of dormancy and period of decline of PRIs. It also examines forces of centralisation and decentralisation. It monitors recommendation of various Panchayat Raj Study teams. It analyses role of state bureaucracy and the impact of political parties on the functioning of PRIs. In the second section attempt is made to cover the State Act, elections, and reservation. It also tries to cover the special provisions of the state, devolution of power and function in the state and role of finance commission. It also emphasizes on the steps taken to improve transparency and accountability. It attempts to include the special provision of governance for the predominantly tribal areas of the North East classified under its VI Schedule. Additionally it includes the special system for Schedule V areas in the states of central India and adjacent states ^[2].

The book highlights the study of states and union territories of India. It takes into consideration administrative decentralisation and development, participatory approach and financial decentralisation. It attempts to capture impact of political party on the functioning of PRIs in states. It lacks detail account of decentralisation, development and financial decentralisation. It does not mention in detail about the planning, capacity building and the role of PRIs as an agency of empowerment of weaker sections. It does not cover the impact of reservation of weaker sections in Panchayats which serves as a training ground for people willing to enter public life. It does not mention much about the emerging leadership of the weaker sections which is bound to carry overall empowerment of weaker sections. The book simply restricts to political empowerment of weaker sections through institutional intervention. It mentions only quantitative representation of weaker sections but it does not highlight the qualitative representation of weaker sections. It limits the scope of the book to only political empowerment while excluding other dimensions of

empowerment, which are equally important for the overall empowerment of weaker sections.

The available literature on Panchayati Raj Institutions may be broadly classified into nine groups. The first group includes those books which have focus on reaching the goal of development through administrative decentralisation.

4. Panchayati Raj and development

This includes Surat Singh, (ed.), (2004), the book attempts to present the grand realities in the states of India. The book has five sections. The first section deals with conceptual dimension, second section analyses national dimension, the third section focuses on women and weaker sections, the fourth section highlights the issue of capacity building and the last section integrates the four dimensions and puts it in the experiences of different states ^[3].

Yatindra Singh Sisodia (2005), the author argues that in almost all states two or three rounds of elections for PRIs completed. Due to 73rd amendment there is sizeable presence of marginalised and poor in local governance may be termed as a landmark development in the rural politics of the country. It becomes a serious matter of debate as to how these poor and marginalized will effectively tackle local power equation and set the agenda for development ^[4].

L.C. Jain, (ed.), (2005), the book is a collection of twenty (20) articles which focuses on decentralised governance and its importance in globalising world. Though the book exclusively examines India yet it tries to cover South Africa and Pakistan. It considers 73rd amendment as a historic movement towards deepening democracy and advancing development through decentralisation. It is based on empirical evidences and uses multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach in locating the status of PRIs in India ^[5].

M. R. Biju, (ed.), (2006), the book is written from the governance or administrative decentralisation perspective. It locates the devolution of fund, function and functionaries in different states, compares them and suggests remedial measures for revamping and revitalizing the institution of rural local self-governance ^[6].

Girish Kumar (2006), the book attempts to reconstruct the contemporary history of decentralisation in India based on the experiences of West Bengal, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. The selected four states represent four generations of Panchayats. It also tries to see the role of political parties on the functioning of PRIs in the concerned states. The author argues that PRIs have contributed in the expansion of social base of democracy and in deepening of democratisation at the local level ^[7].

5. Panchayati Raj and participation

This section focuses on reaching the goal of development through participation.

Manoj Rai et al (2001), the book attempts to unravel and analyse the past, present and future of PRIs. It primarily focuses on Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujrat, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Orrisa. It comes out with recommendations to make Panchayat as unit of local self-governance ^[8].

M.P. Paramesvaran (2005), the book deals with the experiences encountered in an applied research that attempts to restructure local power structure in Kerala. In the process it highlights the role of participatory planning and implementation in achieving the goal of empowerment ^[9].

6. Panchayati Raj and decentralised planning

This section focuses on reaching the goal of development through decentralised planning.

T.M. Thomas Issac (2002), the book analyses one of the world's most extensive and successful campaigns launched in Kerala in 1996 which mobilized three million people and resulted in bottom up development planning. It attempts to trace the background of campaign, stages, problems and successes, and evaluates concrete results and reforms ^[10].

Rakesh Hooja and Meenakshi Hooja (2007), there are fifteen essays in the book which tries to trace decentralisation and planning in pre and post 73rd amendment phase. It attempts to relate theory with actual practise ^[11].

7. Panchayati Raj and case study

This section focuses on a single case in detail and conducted to develop a deeper understanding of the research problem.

Yatindra Singh Sisodia (2007), the Gram Swaraj system was introduced in Madhya Pradesh in 2001. The book attempts to capture and document the trends of the functioning of Gram Swaraj in Madhya Pradesh ^[12].

Bhaktapada Sinha Roy (2008), the book analyses the functioning of PRIs under the present left government in transforming the standard of living of the rural poor. It captures and documents the involvement of PRIs in poverty alleviation and rural development programme ^[13].

8. Panchayati Raj and political party

This section focuses on the impact of political party on the functioning of PRIs.

Buddhadeb Ghosh and Girish Kumar (2003), the book attempts to capture sustenance and growth of PRIs in Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal and Bihar, which are dependent on certain social and political variables, which are not necessarily independent of one another. Attempt is made to identify the political variables from the concerned state political history, even though the social realities of the state had to be kept in mind in order to appreciate the political facts in this perspective ^[14].

9. Panchayati Raj and law

This section examines the legal aspects which appear during the implementation of various policies.

K.C. Shivaramakrishnan (2009), the book focuses on the issues of elections, delimitation, planning and functional domain of PRIs. It also tries to capture various political and legal disputes which occur during the process of implementation ^[15].

10. Panchayati Raj and capacity building

This section analyses the aspect of capacity building of Panchayati Raj representatives.

G. Palanithurai (2005), the book captures the details of the efforts taken by Gandhigram Rural Institute in the capacity building of male and female presidents in the eight districts of Tamil Nadu. It evaluates the pre training and post training of presidents and incorporates the feedback of the training programme ^[16].

11. Panchayati Raj and financial devolution

The section focuses on the issue of financial devolution to local governments.

M.A. Oommen (2008), the book seeks to fill the gap relating to the state sub-state level fiscal decentralisation issues of India. It critically reviews the aspects related to fiscal

decentralisation in the post 73rd amendment period by the state governments ^[17].

Mohd. Azam Khan and Tosib Khan (2011), argue that with the passage of 73rd amendment a uniform structure of Panchayats emerged throughout the country. The PRIs need to be adequately empowered both functionally and financially to function as the true institutions of local self-governance. The book examines opportunities and challenges posed by the 73rd amendment ^[18].

The work focuses on the empowerment of weaker sections. So there is not much emphasis on sampling, methodology, findings and limitations of the above mentioned books.

12. Panchayati Raj and empowerment of weaker sections

This section has focus on the empowerment of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and women.

Susheela Kaushik (1993), argues that the 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India provides reservation of seats for women in PRIs. Although the seats reserved for women is not proportionate to their size yet it is a welcome step. The book attempts to document wide variation in the structure, function, jurisdiction and tenure of PRIs. It also discusses nature, content of political participation and strategy for action. She argues that women in rural areas lack the requisite political knowledge, awareness and capabilities for effective leadership. So she highlights the importance of capacity building. Women empowerment can be achieved only through the socio-economic advancement and increase in number and participation in the decision-making process, which in result not only change their lives but also the functioning of public institutions. So far the quantitative representation of women in political sphere has not brought about qualitative change ^[19].

She argues that quantitative representation of women in PRIs has not brought qualitative change. As the conclusion is drawn on the basis of qualitative method so inference cannot be drawn.

Bidyut Mohanty (1995), argues that the 73rd constitutional amendment would provide opportunity to around one million women representatives and they will become part of political process. Women get unequal treatment in food, health and economy. This discrimination against women cuts across castes and class. Women do not have much social and political power they are also unable to exercise political power. Criminalisation and factionalism of politics, emergence of fundamentalism at macro level and lack of awareness regarding legal and economic aspects prevent women from taking part in political process. It indicates that quota of seats is a necessary but not sufficient condition for women to participate in politics. The caste Panchayat would not like women to come out and take part in public meetings as it goes against tradition. Majority of representatives are illiterate, wives or sisters of someone, no understanding of rules and regulations and additionally they deal with insensitive bureaucracy so many of them will become proxy members. The women have to come across the above mentioned hurdles before becoming effective partners in the decision-making process ^[20].

To substantiate her theoretical argument she mentions cases from Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Karnataka. The cases are based on secondary sources.

Poornima Vyasulu and Vinod Vyasulu (1999), argue that recognising the limitation of gender, India made law that makes it mandatory for local government to include women.

It is a case study of Karnataka based on the field level experiences of women in PRIs. There are six (6) cases which present women representatives trapped in different circumstances. The women representatives come with their social and economic disadvantages and it cannot be changed by constitutional amendment. If PRIs to succeed in achieving its objective then it must work with traditional institutions, not confront them head on. Gender identity is always alloyed with caste, class and religious factors. The problem faced by women representatives is due to society not in the PRIs, which only reflects social reality. The bureaucracy is gender insensitive. The hostility of NGOs to PRIs needs to be reduced. To bring fundamental change in society, much more than PRIs are required, but that does not mean PRIs are not important. Much more will be needed if gender justice is to become the norm ^[21].

Karnataka is a middle ranking state and Malgudi is selected as it is middle ranking district. It is based on non-probability sampling so statistical methods cannot be applied.

Sukanta Bhattacharyya (2003), it is the case study of Ryan village in Burdwan district of West Bengal and attempts to locate caste, class and power linkage between brahminical and non-brahminical groups in Ryan panchayat. The work uses formal and informal and empirical data. The research is based on extensive and intensive field work. The sample size is of thirty (30). Out of thirty (30), fifteen (15) is from brahminical group and fifteen (15) is from non-brahminical group. In the Panchayat election of 1978-83, out of five (05) members four (4) were from brahminical group while one (01) was from non-brahminical group. Of the four (04) brahminical group, one (01) was rich peasant and three (03) were middle peasants. In the Panchayat election of 1993, out of five (05), two (02) are from brahminical group and three (03) are from non-brahminical group. The present Panchayat is dominated by middle peasants and agricultural labourers. This is a major shift in the distribution of power. The relationship between caste, class and politics in Ryan is drawn at PRIs and the organizational structure of CPI(M). The numerical strength of the lower caste and classes has been established at the level of Panchayat and other organizations but at the leadership level power is still concentrated in the hands of middle peasantry ^[22].

It is the study of Ryan Panchayat of Burdwan district of West Bengal. It does not explain about the type of sample.

Peter Ronald deSouza (2003), argues that the 73rd constitutional amendment provides reservation to Dalits, Adivasis, and women and attempt is made to examine the implications of institutional innovations for local government and marginalized groups in the context of Indian democracy. The article is in three sections. The first looks at the issues that are significant for understanding the constitutional amendment. The second section examines the working of institutional innovations. The third section attempts to place the local self-government within the larger scheme of India's federation. The incidents of violence against Dalits and Adivasis are on the rise with the 73rd amendment. The caste system, patriarchy and land are the three axes that are intimately related which constitute the rural power structure of India. The poverty line and the pollution line coincide. The amendment is an attempt to tackle the rural power matrix by redesigning and reforming the existing PRIs. In the context of rural power structure the reservation for Dalits, Adivasis and women also gives

weaker sections access to the "symbolic capital" that they need in their struggle for a just order. The violence committed by dominant group on the weaker sections especially in the context of police force that is controlled by the dominant castes, which is insensitive and inattentive to the plight of weaker sections is an area of concern. How the violence against Dalits should be interpreted, with respect to short term losses or with the long term goal of attaining the goal of equal citizenship ^[23].

The Dalits are the victim of dominant caste violence and the police are insensitive and inattentive as they are controlled by dominant castes.

Aureliano Fernandes (2003), argues that aggrandiser government in most states continue to hold power which has been formally devolved to local government through conformity legislations. Deficiencies in facilitating the potential of PRIs persist at state level, PRIs level and at the civil society level. Changes in empowerment of PRIs will not emerge without a change at the civil society level. The devolution of power to third-tier may result replacement of state bureaucracy with Panchayat bureaucracy with all its functional malaise. If PRIs have to fulfil its foundational tenets of empowering community at the village level then there is need to transcend the thinking that devolution of powers will alone ensure good governance. In order to succeed PRIs have to transform from constitutionally created institutions from above to community institutions, which has certain legitimacy with support and participation from large section of population. It needs to fulfil a social contract with inclusive participatory planning and associationism as essential methodologies to transform rural India ^[24].

The article mainly focuses on administrative decentralisation and does not focus much on the empowerment of weaker sections instead focuses on strengthening of PRIs.

Amitabh Behar and Yamini Aiyar (2003), the article highlights the issues emerging from the micro initiatives towards the formation of association and networks of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs). It is based on the field experiences and raises three main concerns. First, due to bureaucratic resistance and lack of political will inadequate functions, functionaries and funds are made available to Panchayats. Second, the Panchayat institutions are dominated by local elites and third, the lack of capacity of representatives and Panchayat institutions in performing their constitutionally mandated duty. Despite the vast amount of resources invested by the state governments and others the capacity building of PRIs remained weak and ineffective. The network of women representatives promotes solidarity, who are divided by caste, class, religious and geographical boundaries. In the networks women learn from the experiences of each other. The act of going out of village to attend network meetings is a sign of empowerment. The experiences and network of women representatives is a positive movement which will not only strengthen grass root democracy but also towards the creation of a space for effective political action for women ^[25].

The article mainly focuses on capacity building of EWRs. It holds that capacity building of EWRs leads to empowerment of women. It considers that well trained EWRs will create space for effective political action of women.

G.K. Lieten (2003), the book is the outcome of fifteen years of intensive field work. It covers Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Kerala the three states are located in north, east and south of India. It uses qualitative method and uses macro data or survey data. It presents the insights in the daily life of men and women in the villages of the said states. It compares the functioning of Panchayats in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. It also tries to document the impact of land reform in West Bengal, the causes of high human development index in Kerala, caste and communalism at village level, the view of villagers on the post-modernist development, caste and position of women and child labour and family views on children. In doing so the author treats the view of the villager as the principle empirical evidence. The book is based on around eighteen months of intensive field work in the 1990s. The author concludes that differences do not emerge along the religious or regional divide but rather along the class divide and to a lesser extent on gender divide. He further argues that social relations span around economic changes. The impact of economic changes is quite visible in labour relations, power structures, politics and caste/class and gender identities ^[26].

The book does not explain much about how and why the changes taking place in the rural society. The use of qualitative method limits the scope of the book and inference cannot be drawn from the findings.

Mahi Pal (2004), argues that the objective of the 73rd amendment is to provide certainty, continuity and strength to PRIs but the experiences of states show that they are slow in devolving fund, function and functionalities to Panchayats. The Tenth Plan observed that most of the court cases, grievances of aggrieved parties related to reservation of seats for SCs, /STs/OBCs and women, delimitation of constituency, percentage of reservation of chairpersons of lower tier to higher tier in most of the cases the state governments have not taken the issues seriously so that a final decision of courts become available as early as possible. It shows the apathy of the states in ensuring early participation of women and weaker sections in local decision-making process. The provision of reservation has improved awareness and perception levels and created an urge to assert their rightful share in decision-making process at local level. With initial clashes among the higher castes and lower castes there are indications of cohesion at local level ^[27].

It mainly focuses on devolution of fund, function and functionalities. It also considers that the state government is not taking the court cases seriously so that weaker sections can participate early in the decision-making process.

Ajit Kumar (2004), the study describes politics within a village community and its interrelationship with land and caste. It is the study of Nagpur district of Maharashtra. In the early 1960s caste considerations strongly influenced Panchayat decisions but in the 1990s institutional politics has broader caste base. The study is the combination of anthropological method of participant observation and discussion and survey method. The reservation policy has increased the mobilization of lower castes in political process. The avenue for mobility in caste based, economically and educationally backward communities is through role models. Leaders and factions exercise political control by seeking access to public resources. The ability to include and delete names from BPL list is a potent tool. The leadership has shifted from sarpanch of substantial land

holding to the sarpanch of middle class. The existing mechanism discourages local resource mobilization and the work is executed through contractors ^[28].

It reveals the linkage between caste and class. It is based on non-probability sampling so inference cannot be drawn.

Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo (2004), argue that reservation of electoral seats is an effective tool to safeguard the interest of weaker sections. It is the study of Birbhum district of West Bengal and Udaipur district of Rajasthan. The need of men and women differ and it is reflected in their decision. Despite the lack of education, lack of experience and the perception of weak leadership, women have a real impact on policy decisions. Women invest more in goods that are relevant to the needs of local women. SC Pradhans invest a larger share of public goods in public hamlets. It appears that when SCs gain more power, they do not feel the need to radically change the types of goods that they are getting, but rather to get a little more of everything ^[29].

It is the comparative study of Birbhum district of West Bengal and Udaipur district of Rajasthan. It does not discuss about the type of sample used. It does not draw conclusion for the state and compares them, it attempts to capture trends of Birbhum and Udaipur respectively.

J.L. Singh (2005), the book has twenty nine articles which attempts to access the process of political mobilization of women through reservation. PRIs are able to fulfil the hopes they created. The book is based on qualitative method which follows content analysis of primary and secondary sources. Social justice based on gender equality is best pursued at local level. Women representatives have touched upon new areas of local administration due to their understanding of practical problems of day to day life. The 73rd amendment has enabled them into decision-making and their large number in Panchayats have brought qualitative change. Criminalization of politics, lack of safety and security and illiteracy are the major factors that discourage participation of women in politics. Social progress among women may be promoted effectively through the media of personal relationship among them. The 73rd amendment is a boon for women and their social, economic and mental suppression is improving in male dominated society. Successful and effective women leaders have opened gate for a lot of women. Feminization of politics would help in building humane and equitable social order ^[30].

The book does not use quantitative method, it relies only on qualitative method.

Deepa Narayan, (ed.), (2006), the book has nineteen (19) articles divided in five (5) sections. It applies interdisciplinary perspective to measure empowerment. The authors draw from their research and experiences from local, community, national and various regions of the world to measure empowerment of the poor. There is extensive use of case study to substantiate the argument. Some of the articles have extensively used statistical methods to measure empowerment ^[31].

The book links quantitative and qualitative data, research questions and theories to contribute to the existing pool of conceptual theoretical framework.

Dayabati Roy (2008), argues that PRIs have been expected to aid the disappearance of subalternity on the contrary her ethnographic study of two villages of Hooghly district of West Bengal reveals divisions between the elite and subaltern continue to exist in the CPI(M) ruled state. The

people are treated more as subjects than as citizens in a system in which they have to solicit the ruler's favour for their survival or minimum improvement in their living conditions. The givers of benefit are patrons and the takers of benefit are clients that characterises the PRIs. The benefits are distributed not as rights but as favours. The caste-class division seem to be reflected in the PRIs, notwithstanding the law that has institutionalized the participation of weaker sections in PRIs. On the one hand subaltern shows submissiveness in one context and defiance in other. The elitist hankering for power seemed to dominate the consciousness of representatives of weaker sections, overshadowing the subaltern in them. The political situation reveals the complete subordination of the SC and ST sections to the organized domain or the hegemony of a single party for thirty long years^[32].

It is the comparative study of two villages of Hoogly district of West Bengal. The findings are based on qualitative method. It is based on non-probability sampling so inference cannot be drawn.

Nupur Tiwari (2009), argues that biggest success of PRIs in India is that it has politically and socially empowered women from the Dalits, Adivasis, backwards, poor and illiterates. It is based on large survey, which covered gram Panchayats in 23 states and has a sample size of more than 20,000. It includes Elected Women Representatives (EWRs), Elected Male Representatives (EMRs), former EWRs and government officials. Nearly 15,000 EWRs in the sample belong to SCs, STs and backward communities, and are evenly divided above and below the poverty line. EWRs seem to prioritise those development needs that seem to be more pressing from their perspective. 60% EWRs reported no gender discrimination, 94% mentioned that they feel free in raising issues and 95% reported that they would never have elected if there was no reserved seats for them. The successful EWRs now act as a role model. She argues that EWRs should be given 10 to 15 years of continued opportunity, which can perhaps nudge them in the right direction and encourage and nurture them to be assertive and independent^[33].

It is the study of 23 states of India, having sample size of over 20,000. It does not explain the rationale of selection of sample and does not explain how SCs, STs and OBCs are evenly divided above and below poverty lines.

B.S. Baviskar and George Mathew, eds., (2009), the book has fifteen articles covering various dimensions of inclusion and exclusion of SCs, STs and women in PRIs. It is the study of twelve states based on intensive field work or participant observation. Three Panchayats are selected from the same block and the same district of the state. Out of the three Panchayats one is woman headed, second is either SC or ST headed and the third is headed by the dominant caste. The researcher spent one month in each gram panchayat and one month to see the functioning of block and Zilla Parishad. The duration of the field work for one state is four months. The primary data is collected from field work. The author concludes that there is no uniform pattern in terms of empowerment of weaker sections in the different states. The regions with a tradition of social reforms like Maharashtra, Gujarat and South India have responded favourably to the institutional intervention for inclusion of weaker sections^[34].

It does not take into account the socio-economic profile of representatives, which has significant bearing on the

empowerment of weaker sections. Quantitative and qualitative methods are combined not only to gain their individual strength but also to compensate for the particular faults and limitations of any single research method. Triangulation of methods helps in overcoming research bias.

13. Conclusion

It is evident from the review of available literature that the PRIs have been recurring concerns of researchers, policy planners and academics. However, the focus of research and studies has been shifting over the years. Studies focusing exclusively on the linkage between institutions of PRIs and empowerment are meagre. Though substantive literature have come up during the last few years, the nuances of addressing the issue of empowerment have not been properly addressed. Most of the studies restrict themselves to analysis of empowerment only in terms of quantitative representation. They hardly attempt to capture the qualitative dimensions of empowerment. It is important to re-emphasise that a comprehensive understanding of empowerment cannot be restricted merely to quantitative representation of the weaker sections in the institution of PRIs. It cannot be a terminal point of empowerment. Empowerment of weaker section should be understood in terms of their qualitative representation in the institution which may redefine the power relations at the local level.

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