Conference on
Empowerment of Women in Panchayats: The Road Ahead
28-29 September 2013
Venue: Convocation Centre, University of Kashmir, Srinagar
Empowerment of Women in Panchayats: The Road Ahead

The Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi in co-operation with the University of Kashmir organized a landmark conference of elected women panchayat representatives of Jammu and Kashmir state in Srinagar, the capital city on 28-29 September, 2013. This was the first such meeting to be convened since the state's halqa level panchayat elections of 2011, held with great public enthusiasm despite militant threats.

The meeting was co-sponsored by United Nations Development Program's India office and the Planning Commission of India. The University of Kashmir extended academic and logistics support. Several hundreds of elected women representatives of panchayats (EWRs), women activists from different districts of the state, scholars, legal luminaries and political leaders participated in the event which was held in the Convocation Hall of the University's beautiful campus situated against the backdrop of the Pir Panjal mountains.

Under the Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act, 1989 (which predates the Indian Constitution's 73rd Amendment that gave statutory status to panchayat bodies) and its subsequent amendments, members of village level local government institutions - panchayat halqas - are directly elected by the people, and since 2011 one-third of the seats are reserved for women. In the recent elections to the halqa panchayats over 28248 candidates were elected out of which 9424 are women.

The Conference aimed to examine the current situation of women elected representatives, discuss how they could effectively function as leaders and decision makers in public life, document cases of successful leadership, create awareness about the importance of their role in panchayats, and deliberate on ways and means to ensure good governance at village level by elected leaders including the women representatives - a prerequisite for people's participation and responsive government in any democratic state.

The Inaugural Session commenced with rousing songs by the girls of Rahat Ghar, a home for children orphaned by conflict in the state. Prof. Nilofer Khan, Dean, Department of Student's Welfare and Director, Women's Studies Centre, Kashmir University and Ms Shamima Raina, Sr. Vice-President, Jammu & Kashmir Mahila Congress, welcomed the delegates and guests.
Quoting Iqbal’s inspiring verse on Kashmir -“The earth whose dust conceals the fire of the chinar in its conscience can never go cold, nor ever lose its self respect”

Dr George Mathew, Chairman, Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) spoke of Institute’s commitment, formed as early as 1984, to make Jammu and Kashmir one of the priority states in its work of promoting democratic local governance.

The UNDP Deputy Country Director Alexandra Solovieva congratulated the Panchayat women and said that global evidence shows that progress towards development goals is undermined "if opportunity and justice are not universally accessible to all sections of society. Due to inherent power imbalances, women are more prone to such exclusions". However, when women have a strong presence in local bodies they tend to ensure adequate investment in areas like education, health, water and sanitation, and access to economic opportunities and justice, all of which are critical to human development.

The chief guest, Mr Ali Mohammad Sagar, Minister for Rural Development and Panchayats, in his inaugural address stated his government’s plans for devolution of powers and finances to panchayats. He announced that monthly honoraria to panchayat members would soon become a reality, that orders have been issued to 14 departments and block and halqa level officials to cooperate with elected representatives and involve them in implementation of development schemes, and that his ministry has asked the union government for enhanced aid in order to transfer Rs 10 lakhs annually to each panchayat to accelerate development activities.

Groups of elected members met the Minister to voice their grievances directly to him and these interactions were well reported in the press.

Planning Commission member Dr. Syeda Hameed in her address said that the panchayats were at this point of time the most important sector in government, the one that was actually going to make a difference to the state. She raised the issue of the steep decline in child sex ratios in many districts of the state, a trend that has only emerged recently, as the Census 2011 has highlighted, and exhorted the Panchayat leaders to tackle this problem urgently in their respective districts.

The first plenary session was chaired by Dr. V. Mohini Giri, former chairperson National Commission for Women and founder, Guild of Service. Mr. M.Y. Tarigami, Member, Legislative
Assembly CPI(M), Dr. Rekha Chowdhary, ICSSR National Fellow, University of Jammu, and Mr. Ahmed Ali Fayyaz, Sr. Assistant Editor and Jammu & Kashmir Bureau Chief, The Hindu elicited a flood of questions from the delegates.

Discussions and sharing of experience continued through the rest of the afternoon in the five working groups chaired by Prof. Noor Ahmed Baba, University of Kashmir, Dr. Roshan Ara, President, All India Women's Conference, Kashmir and Dr Aijaz Ashraf Wani, Kashmir University, Dr. Sajjad Shafi, social activist and Ms Ezabir Ali, Jammu & Kashmir Voluntary Health Association.

The inspiring and thought provoking addresses by Dr. Girija Dhar, chairperson of Jammu & Kashmir's first State Commission for Women, who chaired the last session of the day greatly motivated the EWRs. It emboldened them to come forward with their depositions on functioning of panchayats in their constituencies.

A key feature of the first day’s proceedings was the hour long presentation made by Asha Rani, a panch from Wusan, district Baramulla. She shared her experience beginning with how she was first convinced of the need to contest the elections and how demotivated she became later, because the panchayats were not empowered to function effectively. She lamented the fact that she had been unable to meet the expectations of the people because she had no resources to do so. Expressing hope that the visibility given by the conference to EWRs would start improving their status and situation, she said that the presence of so many panches from other parts of the state gave her a sense of solidarity, a feeling echoed by many other panches during the conference.

Nazrana-e-Khusro: In the evening, Urdu litterateur Begum Zakia Zaheer and Dr Syeda Hameed presented a scintillating recital of compositions by the 13th century poet-mystic Amir Khusro,
sung by Rene Singh. Amir Khusro, a multi-faceted polyglot, has been venerated in Asia and the Middle East for over 800 years. His poems and *paheliya* (riddles) survive in the oral traditions of Urdu, Persian and Hindi speaking peoples. He thus symbolizes the synthesis of cultural, linguistic and mystical traditions that developed in North India in mediaeval times.

The second plenary session of the conference was held on the morning of 29 September. Mr A.R. Rather, Minister of Finance & Ladakh Affairs, Government of Jammu and Kashmir was the main speaker. The Minister complimented the ISS for holding this timely conference. He recalled the provisions for women’s empowerment spelt out in a
separate chapter in the 'Naya Kashmir' Manifesto put together by Sheikh Abdullah, founder of the National Conference party which now runs a coalition government in the state. More than 70 years ago the state had developed policies that envisaged equal participation of women in all spheres of public and professional life. People had challenged some of the policies, such as 50 per cent reservation for women students in medical colleges in the courts but that provision had been vehemently defended by former Chief Minister Dr Farooq Abdullah, himself a medical doctor, said Minister Rather.

According to him, the 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in panchayats is a revolutionary step and a precursor to their equal participation in State Legislative Assemblies and Parliament. He gave some practical advice to the assembled Panchayat members: to work with honesty and dedication in their panchayats, accept the most bitter criticism with equanimity, tolerate all forms of adversity and non-cooperation. "In the administration, some people won't want you there, some people will taunt you or not listen to you, and the MLAs will fear competition - you have to tolerate all this if you wish to be elected once more. It is from amongst you that the future political leaders of the state will eventually emerge".

Dr. Effat Wani, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Kashmir University, presented the findings of a case study of District Kupwara which aimed to assess the impact of 33 per cent reservation in local body elections on empowerment of rural women.

The third plenary session was chaired by Prof. Gul Wani, Director, Madanjeet Singh Institute of Kashmir Studies. Following his presentation, Dr. Roshan Ara, President All India Women's Conference, Kashmir Branch and Shamima Raina spoke on critical issues affecting the Panchayats.
Working Group reports were presented in the afternoon, in a session chaired by Prof. Nighat Vasu, Dean, Faculty of Education, Kashmir University. The five topics discussed in the Working Groups were:

- Role of Panchayats in Local Development
- Gender Budgeting and Local Planning
- Health and Other Basic services and Panchayats
- Panchayats, Women and Good Governance, and
- Dynamics of women's participation in Panchayati Raj.

There was consensus among all the groups that the biggest problem faced by EWRs and panchayats in general was total lack of awareness and funds. Illiteracy was also highlighted as an important constraint in functioning as people's representatives. Other factors hampering their full participation in the panchayats which came up in the discussions were: an 'essentially chauvinistic' society, corruption, Sarpanch-official nexus in implementation of schemes, party politics at the village level, lack of respect shown to EWRs by block level officials, lack of information and training.

The Valedictory function witnessed the culmination of the two days of
The aspirations, enthusiasm, energy, emotions and hard work that the women who had gathered there had put in over the last two days. Prof. Talat Ahmed, Vice-Chancellor Kashmir University, while enumerating the key objectives of the conference in his introductory remarks, succinctly captured this mood. Moved by the enthusiasm of the elected women representatives as well as that of the students and faculty of the university, he assured future cooperation of the university for similar academic research and endeavors.

The Governor of Jammu & Kashmir H.E. Mr. N.N. Vohra, who is Chancellor of Kashmir University, was the chief guest of the valedictory function. In his address the Governor said, "Women have to play a vital role if the State has to achieve speedy progress and prosperity." He called upon the women Panchayat representatives to take keen interest in their new role and contribute meaningfully to ensure the effective implementation of welfare and development programmes in the villages. Quoting constitutional provisions, which support the empowerment and rights of women, and the decentralization of powers, the Governor stressed the need for increasing awareness among women Sarpanchs and Panchs so that they are fully aware of their rights and duties. He added that devolution of powers at the grassroots level is
Institute of Social Sciences

the key for securing a balanced and all round development of communities and the state. The Governor complimented the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, and the University of Kashmir and their collaborators for organizing such a Conference on an extremely important theme and for bringing elected women representatives from remote districts to Srinagar. He expressed hopes that both the institutions would join hands to organize more such programmes in the near future.

Prof.M.Aslam, Vice-Chancellor, Indira Gandhi National Open University, delivered the valedictory address. He spoke extensively about the varied aspects of women empowerment and the need for further strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions in the State. He spoke of the numerous innovative training modules developed by him and his colleagues in IGNOU for capacity building of
panchayat representatives, including many which were specially formulated for semi- or non-literate panchayat members. Unfortunately, these training materials have rarely been used in actual training programmes, he said. Prof. Aslam recalled that he had expressed the wish for such a conference to be held in Srinagar way back in December 2012 when the Institute of Social Sciences celebrated the 20th anniversary of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment. He emphatically asserted that strengthening local governance and grass roots democracy was the panacea for much of the ills and pain that the people of Jammu and Kashmir have had to bear in the past couple of decades.

Ms Seema Khajuria, Additional Advocate General, Jammu and Kashmir felicitated the elected women representatives who had stood up to contest the elections against great odds, including threats to their lives in the 2011 panchayat elections. Dwelling on the constitutional aspects regarding women's empowerment, she emphasized that no country can prosper if 50 per cent of its citizens were unable to realize their rights. Ms. Khajuria highlighted the many facets of genuine empowerment including the ability to take decisions on one's own.
Dr. George Mathew, Chairman of ISS while addressing the gathering, confessed that the occasion had made him emotional as both Panchayati Raj and the state of Jammu and Kashmir were close to his heart. He thanked the Governor H.E. N.N. Vohra and the state ministers Mr. Ali Mohd. Sagar and Mr. A.R. Rather for their support, as well as the University of Kashmir and its Vice Chancellor Prof. Talat Ahmed and the people of the state for helping to make the conference a success.

Prof. Nilofer Khan, University of Kashmir, proposed the vote of thanks, bringing to a close a unique event that brought University faculty and students, independent research scholars, political party workers and leaders and media persons together with grassroots elected women local government members for the first time in the history of Panchayati Raj in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.
State government has failed us, say women panchs, sarpanchs

Alleges that even two years after panchayat poll, power has not been transferred to them

Rising Kashmir
Srinagar, Monday 30th September 2013

Empower panchs: Governor

Srinagar, Sept 29: Governor N N Vohra today said Panchayat representatives across J&K need to be fully empowered for better governance at grassroot level.

"If it is said if things are not working at grassroots level," he said during deliberation function of a two-day conference on empowerment of women in Panchayat at Kashmir University.

"Besides, power at grassroots level is must."

Volvo said the constitution of Jammu and Kashmir has an important provision which calls to secure for all women the right to equality (political, social and economic sphere) of life.

"Still, there is less number of women in Panchayat," he said.

The governor, however, did not touch the issues facing the women Panchayat members.

"I have failed to government for over certain things, but nothing has been done as of now," Vohra said.

He hailed women representatives for reviving their duties but did not talk about their right. "You should raise your voice and we would prosper," Vohra said.

Earlier, Finance Minister Shabir Shah said women empowerment was a core concern in National Conference Sonamarg.

Shehla Mushtaq Mohibullah's Naya Kashmir (Shiv) Kashmir document for J&K cannot be discarded.

He said Article 32 of the Naya Kashmir document talks about the empowerment of women. "We would have to redress grievances of large number of women," he said.

Khattar hailed for devotion of power and giving power to Panchayat representatives.

"We are making poor people poorer by working in the opposite direction. We are creating problems," he said.

Institute of Social Sciences