

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH PANCHAYAT: A STUDY OF WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES

Mrinal Sarma

Faculty, Department of Political Science
Anundoram Barooah Academy Degree College

Abstract

Political empowerment of women is a crucial issue in present time not only for the success of a political system but also for the enhancement of the status and condition of women in society. Despite the fact that women constitutes almost half of the total population but still equality of women with that of man has not been fully achieved yet. Their position and status are still considered to be inferior to man. In countries like India where the rigid patriarchal norms are found to be very strong, women have become the weaker sections of the society. Their range of activities have been limited in all the spheres be it politics, economics, culture, society and the like by the age old traditional believes and male dominated mindset of the society. In most of the time they are expected to remain under the four walls of house doing the unpaid household activities. In the 21st century although mobilization of women in some societal and economic activities has been seen to some extent but the picture of political participation of women is still very pathetic not only in India but in the whole world. In this paper I will enquire into the facts and matters related to women participation in politics through grassroots political institution Village Panchayats.

Key words – Equality, Empowerment, Political Participation.

1. Introduction

Local self government is regarded as an integral part of democracy. The institution of local self government popularly known as panchayat is an important instrument of decentralization. Mahatma Gandhi the father of Indian nation believed that the spirit of India lives in the villages of the country. Hence our democracy cannot become strong unless its villages take active part in the democratic processes. Now it is realized that genuine development of rural areas can take place only through a process of decentralized planning, implementation and fully involving the local people. To achieve this goal, one should stand committed to the task of devolution of powers and financial resources to the Panchayat Raj Institutions enabling fullest participation of people in the process of nation building activities and development.

The institutions of Panchayati Raj have been the backbone of the villages of India since the beginning of recorded history. It is involved with the governance of rural villages in one form or another. The evolution and origin of village Panchayats is also as old as India itself. These were the mostly democratic, genuine, highly organized and successful village system in ancient India. These village systems are also referred to in the Vedas, the epics, the Manusmritis, Buddhist and Jain literatures, in Mahabharat and Ramayan and in Arthashastra of Kautilya. Mention of the village assembly is also found in the inscriptions of ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries indicating the existence of an organized system of rural local governance system.

The institution of local self government was institutionalized for the first time in 1858 by the British Government with an aim to get cooperation from Indians and for decentralizing financial management system. The policy of financial decentralization in 1870, the village Chowkidar Act in Bengal, the famous Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882, the Bombay Municipal Act of 1880, the Royal Commission of Decentralization were some of the important steps in the development of local self government taken by British India. The government of India Act 1919 and 1935 had some provisions to strengthening the local bodies. After independence, the Constitution of India included a provision relating to promotion of institutions of rural local self governance i.e. Panchayat Raj system. Article 40 in the Chapter on "Directive Principles of State Policy" states that "the states should take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government". Article 246 empowers the state legislatures to make laws with respect to any subject relating to local self government.

But during all these developmental stages, women had not acquired any significant position in local government system. In this case the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1993 is considered as a milestone event in the development of the institution local government system i.e. panchayat. The Act aimed at strengthening the panchayati raj system enabling fullest participation of men and women. It provided for a reservation of one third of seats for women in panchayats.

2. Statement of the problem

If we look at the status of women and their participation in self-governance systems, both are still very low and sometimes elected women are merely figureheads. No doubt the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act has provided means and ways for political empowerment to women but the issues related to our as old tradition and socioeconomic structures of the society is still unresolved. Issues like mindset of society about public life of women, capabilities of women in decision making, socio-economic disabilities of women like illiteracy, poverty, ignorance, in assertiveness etc., insecurity in the political activities, capacity to stand against social impediments like the division of castes, class, patriarchal attitude, ethnic, religious separation etc forms the obstacles that creates hindrance for women to participate in political processes.

3. Review of literature

Joshi Meenakshi, Joshi Manisha and Pandey Jaya, in their book *Women participation in Panchayat Raj: (Experience from Uttarakhand)*, mentioned about the attitude of the community towards reservation of seats, decision making ability of women members and service delivery by women members. Here, people's response is not much satisfactory.

Palanithurai in the book *Major Issues in New Panchayati Raj System (1997)* has revealed that the village women know their problems, priorities, solutions and strategies but they do not know where from the resources are to be mobilized and how to initiate. They need a little orientation to make their participation more effective.

Ranga Rao in *Women No more Political Novice, Kurukhetra.* (1994) has pointed out that Indian women today are not what they were ten years back with the fast changing socio-economic scenario being witnessed today, coupled with the political empowerment, by the turn of the century, they are not going to be what they are today.

B.Dharmalingam and K.Dastagir Gulam in their article, *emerging women leadership and Rural local Government inclusive legislation in Tami Nadu: Social Welfare magazine*, said about role of women leaders in rural local Government, strategies for gender mainstreaming in rural local Government and awareness creation for the better participation. The importance issue through women's reservation is gender mainstreaming.

4. Objectives of the study

1. To analyze the socio-economic and educational background of women representatives.
2. To evaluate the extent to which the women representatives are aware of their functional roles and responsibilities.
3. To assess the extent of participation of elected representatives in the rural local self governance system.

5. Methodology

The present study is based mostly on empirical evidences. Descriptive analytical method has been used in the study. For the collection of primary data field survey was done. Simple random sampling technique was employed for the selection of sample. A number of female representative were interviewed following a questionnaire with intrinsically open ended and close ended questions. Secondary data were collected from books, magazines, articles and web sites.

6. Universe of the study

The study is undertaken in the Barbhag Development block which contains seven numbers of village panchayats that include forty eight villages.

7. Results and Discussion

Socio economic, political background and role performance of the women representatives of panchayat under Barbag Development Block.

An understanding of socio economic background of women representatives would enable us to find out the nature of leadership at the grassroots level. The variables are age, education and occupation.

Age of Respondents

Age Group	No of women representatives	percentage
25-35	4	25
36-45	10	62.75
45 to above	2	12.5

From the table it is seen that 25% of women belong to the age group of 25-35, 62.75% to the age group of 36-45, 12.5% belong to above 45. Taking the age composition of the women Members as a whole, it is evident younger women are come out to take part in panchayat.

Educational status

Level of Education	No of respondents	percentage
Primary	0	
Below matric	2	12.50
Matriculate	6	37.50
Higher secondary	5	31.58
Graduate	3	18.75

It is evident from the above Table that all the Members of panchayats are literate and have some kind of education. Among them 12.50% is educated up to class IX, 37.50 % are matriculate, 31.58 % have passed higher secondary school and 18.75% are graduates.

Occupational status

Occupation	No of respondents	percentage
Yes	2	12.50
No /House wife	14	87.50

The above table shows that a large number constituting 87.50 percent of women representatives have no occupation. It is a reflection of the fact that economic dependence of women largely on men which may lead to curtailing their role in decision making. But it is seen that dependence does not restricts them in the way of their acquiring leadership position. So we can state that occupation has no direct relationship with the emerging women leadership in the panchayats.

Political background

The 73rd constitutional Amendment Act has provided great opportunity to a large number of women to participate in politics especially at the grass root level. The act made provisions for the reservation of women in grassroots political institutions. It is important to assess the political background of the women representatives to have an adequate knowledge related to their political participation. The variables are political experiences of the women representatives, family members in politics, party affiliation and political awareness of the members.

Political experiences of the women representatives

political experiences	No of respondents	Percentage
Experienced	6	34.5
Non experienced	10	65.50

It is seen from above table that maximum number of women in panchayats are fresh representatives in regards to political participation. Only 34.5 percent has previous political experience which means participation was minimal before. The 33% reservation is an important factor in providing the opportunity for participation of women in Panchayati Raj election.

Family Members in politics

Family Members in politics	No of respondents	Percentage
Yes	12	75
No	4	25

The above table shows that 75 percent of women representative came from family in which there are members of political affiliation. Only 25 percent have come from non political family. Here it is important to note that from amongst 75 percent coming from politically background family many are proxy to male members. They contested in elections because there male family members could not contest due to reservation policy. So from these interference it can be said that in the issue of women participation family belongs to political affiliation matters more in Assam.

Party affiliation

Party affiliation	No of respondents	Percentage
Affiliated	14	87.50
Non affiliated	2	12.5

The Table 1.7 shows that majority of the respondents, i.e. 87.50 percent are affiliated to different political parties and they contested Panchayat elections under the party banner. Only 2 respondents (12.5) contested Panchayat election as independent candidates. Hence it is revealed that affiliation to political party matters to a great extent in regard to participation in panchayats. It is due to the fact that the possibility of victory in elections is higher when they contests under the banner of a political party. Again the affiliated party helps them financially during election expenditure as stated by the respondents.

Political Awareness

Responses	No of respondents	Percentage
Knowledge about 73 rd constitutional Amendedment Act	6	34.5
Knowledge about Panchayatiraj Acts of Assam	9	57
Knowledge of reservation policy	16	100

It is observed from the table that only 34.5 percent of representatives has knowledge about the 73rd constitutional amendment act, rests are unknown to the Act. Again in matters of awareness about Assam panchayati raj Acts more than a little of half have some amount of knowledge about the Acts. During interview it is realized that the members of panchayats are less aware politically comparing to the GP Presidents. Hence it is seen that grassroots women political leaders may either lack in or overlook the true spirit of democratic decentralization pertaining to women empowerment that has been brought to light by the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act.

Role performance of the Women Representatives

It is seen that women find it difficult to assume positions and responsibilities in politics. The explanation offered for is that women's role in household stands in conflict with political roles. It is pertinent to look into the role performance of the women in panchayats to assess the true nature of their participation. The variables are attendance in meetings and average time invested in village affairs per day.

Attendance in meetings

Responses	No of respondents	Percentage
Attended all meetings	10	62.7
Absence in more than two meetings	6	37.5

An analysis of data presented in the above table reveals that majority of the women representatives have attended meetings regularly. 62.7% have attended all the meetings held in the year 2019. So we can say that large number of women representatives is active participants in the meetings as well as in the decision making process of which is reflective of their democratic consciousness.

Average time invested in village affairs per day

Time	No of respondents	Percentage
Less than 1 hour	0	0
1-2 hours	6	37.5%
2- 4 hours	10	62.5%
More than 4 hours	0	0

From the study, it has become clear that majority of women Members have managed time to invest in village activities most of the respondents have stated that they have adequate time for Panchayat activities, but majority of them have recorded that they have carried out their duties and responsibilities in Panchayat after performing their household activities. Thus women respondents have played dual role, they act initially as homemakers and then as representatives of the Panchayats.

8. Major Findings

1. Majority of the respondent belongs to the age of 25 to35 that means from middle age group.
2. All of the respondents are literate and majority of them have cleared secondary education.
3. In regards to political participation most of them are fresher having no previous political experience.
4. Regarding political affiliation majority of the respondents are affiliated to political parties. It is due to the fact that the possibility of victory in elections is higher when they contests under the banner of a political party and the affiliated party also helps them financially in election expenditure.
5. 75 percent of women representative came from family in which there are members of political affiliation. Here it is important to note that from amongst 75 percent coming from politically background family many are proxy to male members. They contested in elections because there male family members could not contest due to reservation policy and they work under close observation and supervision of guardians.
6. From the study it is seen that majority of the respondents are not aware about the Assam Panchayat Act 1994, 73rd and 74th CAA. Only a few are known about these dispenses.
7. When it comes to the role performance of the women representatives majority of them are active. They have attended all the meeting of panchayats and more or less took participation in the activities of panchayats.
8. From the study it is also seen that all the respondents have come from the reserved seats. None of them had contested in the open category seats.

1. Concluding remarks

True democracy cannot find its place where participation in political activities is confined to a specific section of the society denying popular participation of masses. From the inception of our country women participation in political sphere has been very limited and in the case of case of grassroots politics their participation was almost nonexistent till 73rd amendment of the Constitution. But in recent time participation of women in grassroots political institution has raised to a considerable size. The position of women in grassroots politics is better than earlier. Women are getting empowered with the changing of time. The 73rd constitutional amendment act has far reaching effect on women in regards to political empowerment. Women are coming out of their home to actively participate in the political processes of their village through panchayats.

But at the same time it is also realized from the study that the extent to which the level of participation of women was objected by the 73rd constitutional Amendment Act has not fully realized yet because it is seen that many a women members are working as token representatives of their male family members. Women are contesting from the seats reserved to them. In case of open seats, women are less preferred by political parties to contest against male. So to conclude it can be said that although significant development has been marked in case of women’s political empowerment but yet more development is needed to have an equal share of status, position and power with their male counterpart.

References

- Agnew, Vijay(1979) *Elite Women in Indian Politics*, Vikash Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi,.
- Kaushik, Sushila (1997) *Women Panches in Position : A study of PR in Haryana-A Report*.
- Kaushik, S (1993) *Women Participation in Politics*,Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi.
- Mishra, Sweta (1997) *Women and 73rd Constitutional Amendment act : A Critical Appraisal*, *Social Action*,Vol
- Mishra Kavita (2006) *Women's Role in Politics in Modern World*, Omega Publications, New Delhi.
- K. Sheshadri (1976) *Political Linkages and Rural Development*, National Publishing House, New Delhi.
- Palanithurai, G. et,(1997) *Major Issues in New Panchayati Raj System*, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi.
- Rao ranga (1994) *Women No more Political Novice*, *Kurukhetra*.
- Shilaja Nagendra (2008) *Women and Panchayatiraj*,ABO publishers, Jaipur.

Web links

- <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/women-empowerment-in-panchayati-raj-remains-unrealised/articleshow/5855311.cms?from=mdr>
- <https://lawtimesjournal.in/women-empowerment-through-panchayat-raj-system/>
- <https://nalbari.gov.in>