Women Empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: The patriarchal nature of Indian society is reflected even in politics which can be justified through the marginalized participation of women in political domain. It is believed that politics is ‘masculine’ and ‘unwomanly’. Certain factors like social taboos, prejudice, cultural socialization, family burden, family background, gender based labour and lack of access of resources are the combine result of keeping women out of political sphere. In this backdrop, the Panchayati Raj Institutions are playing a pivotal role in facilitating women to participate in the decision making process right from village level. Various researches reveal that women are less corrupt, deliver effective services and improve overall governance. At the same time it is also true that their political journey is not too smooth in a rampant patriarchal society. Women representatives perform their official tasks with the help of husband; they depend on male officials and are over burdened, unrecognized and remained passive in the village Panchayat meetings. Thus, the paper attempts to study the functioning nature of women representatives of village panchayat of four selected Gaon Panchayats under the Mariani Revenue Circle of Jorhat district of Assam, India. The paper also aims at to study the factors affecting the participation and problems faced by the elected women representatives of village panchayats of four selected Gaon Panchayats of the above mentioned selected area.

Key Words: Women, Patriarchy, Village Panchayat, Nature of Participation and Problems.

INTRODUCTION:

Equal citizenship but unequal political participation is an overall reality of global politics. Women constitute almost half of the world population but their participation in politics is very miserable. Globally, the average percentage of women in the national parliament is only 16% (Paxton & Hughes, 2007). India is not exceptional to this situation. As per 2011 census, women constitute almost half of the India’s total population and represent 48.46%. On the contrary the current strength of women representatives in Lok Sabha is only 14% which is the highest number since independence. It reveals that there is huge gender gap between men and women in the domain of decision making process. Women as the equal citizens have the equal potentiality to contribute in the socio-economic developmental process of the country. Even, Gandhiji also believed that women can play a positive role in reconstructing the society (Thakur: 2010). Therefore, women need to be participated in decision making process to make them as the equal co-partner of developmental process of the
country. Further, India, being a so vast and diverse country, decentralization of power and planning is needed especially for rural areas. It is because of the fact that India is a rural country where 68.84% (2011 Census) population lives in rural areas. Gandhiji believed that development of India could only be possible through the development of villages. He said, “...if the village perishes India will perish too. India will be no more India...” The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is the one and only suitable mechanism that can ensure decentralization of power and planning and can facilitate rural women to participate in the decision making process. In fact, the Panchayati Raj Institution plays a very active role in strengthening democracy at the grass-root level. It not only expands the democracy to the village level but also empower the rural women politically, socially and economically through its reservation policy. It is a noble attempt to bring gender equality and women empowerment in the society.

Women Empowerment:

The term ‘empowerment’ is a heavily emotive and loaded concept that focuses on change and development of individual and collective potentials. Broadly speaking, empowerment is a process that deals with the share of power, right to participate in decision making, right to articulate oneself and access to resources. It embodies the notion of authority and to enable (Carl, 2009). The popular meaning of empowerment is to make someone powerful, enable the weak to be strength, to enhance one’s self-image, to be self-confident, to raise voice against injustice and oppression and help someone to fight for her rights (Kumar & Varghese, 2005). Empowerment of women enables them to realize their full potentials and enhance their powers of bargaining in all aspects of their life. It can counter against the exploitation, gender discrimination, gender violence and all other problems they faced being a woman. Women empowerment emancipates women from the age old culture of submission and subjugation to the patriarchal forces as well as enables them to raise their voice to fight against exploitation, injustice, violence and abuse done to them (Kumar & Varghese, 2005). It is the process of social change and transformation of social position from powerless to powerful. It indicates the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance (Kohli, 1997). It enhances women’s self-respect and inner strengths that enable them to enjoy their rights and freedom. It is a process of gaining access as well as controlling of materials and information resources (Suguna, 2006). Empowerment of women is the process of awareness and capacity building that facilitates women for greater participation, access to greater decision making power and control and the action of transformation from powerless to powerful (Sahay, 1998). In other words, women empowerment is a process which intends to provide optimum opportunity to women to participate in the decision making process, enhance their choice, improve capacity building and facilitates their presence in representative and legislative bodies, employment and access to resources. It can tremendously contribute to the socio-economic development of the country. It makes them economically self-reliant, politically bold and socially self-confident to face any challenge.
Objectives: The present paper intends to study the following objectives:

1. To understand the functioning nature of women representatives of village panchayats of four selected Gaon Panchayats under the Mariani Revenue Circle of Jorhat district of Assam, India.

2. The paper also aims at to study the factors affecting the participation and problems faced by the elected women representatives of village panchayats of four selected Gaon Panchayats under the Mariani Revenue Circle of Jorhat district of Assam, India.

Methodology: The study is an empirical work based on exploratory research design under the Mariani Revenue Circle of Jorhat district of Assam. The District has 110 Gaon Panchayats under 6 Revenue Circles. Among the 6 Revenue Circle I have randomly selected the Mariani Revenue Circle as the area of study. In the selected study area there are 16 Gaon Panchayats in where 4 Gaon Panchayats have been selected as a sample study area. Among these 4 Gaon Panchayats namely 15 No. Madhya Nakachari Gaon Panchayat, 60 No. Mariani Bagicha Gaon Panchayat, 59 No. Dakhin Katoni Bagicha Gaon Panchayat and 61 No. Katoni Gaon Panchayat, I have chosen the women representatives of lower tier of the Gaon Panchayat i.e., the Village Panchayat to explore the nature, problems and factors affecting in their participation. For the preparation of this paper data have been collected from both the primary and secondary sources. The primary data have been collected through interview schedule by interacting the elected women representatives of the selected village panchayats. The secondary data have been collected from books, research articles, journals and government report.

Rationale of the Study: Panchayati Raj Institutions and women empowerment are the vibrant topic of social science research. Many studies have been conducted either in the field of Panchayati Raj Institutions or status of women, sometimes both across the country. It is well known that the women representatives are facing various problems in Panchayati Raj Institutions being a female. Illiteracy, male dominance, family burden, malpractices, use of alcohol etc. stands as the major barriers to take correct decisions for women empowerment. The study is also important to find out the family’s role in performing the duties of a woman representative in Panchayati Raj Institutions. In this context, there is little concentration among the academicians about the functioning nature and problems faced by women representatives of Panchayati Raj Institutions especially after the 73rd Amendment Act, in Mariani Revenue Circle under Jorhat District of Assam. Further, the question of how effectively the 1/3rd reservation policy for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions is utilized to empower the women in the selected area of study also necessitates to conduct the present study.

India Constitution on Women Reservation in Panchayats

The year 1993 is a landmark period in the history of women empowerment. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act or the Panchayati Raj Act, 1993 was passed by the Parliament in April 1993 that has
provided 33% reservation of seats for female in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The Act has given women the right to deliberate, debate, and makes decisions in the process of planning, policy formulation and governance. The Act can be seen as an instrument to facilitate the empowerment of women by first empowering the elected women to Panchayati Raj institutions and then empowers the women everywhere, and attempts to establish gender equity and represent their interest. Reservation in PRIs would help them to take their rightful place as par with men as equal citizen. Thus, reservation is not an end in itself but a mean to an end which facilitates the women to contest in the election.

The Act has provided constitutional reorganization to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Under this Act, article 243 and a new schedule XI was added containing 29 subjects were transferred to Panchayats. Thus, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have become a constitutional mechanism to undertake rural development (Joshi and Narwani, 2002).

**Reservation of seats (Article 243D):** The Act provides reservation of seats for women in two ways:

1. 1/3rd reservation of seats for members at all level of Panchayats.
2. 1/3rd reservation of total offices of Chairpersons at each level.

Thus, the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) follows as one-third of the total number of seats shall be reserved for women. Out of total number of seats reserved for SCs and STs, one-third of these seats shall be reserved for women belonging to the SCs and STs Community. One-third offices of Chairpersons at all levels shall be reserved for women (Joshi and Narwani, 2002).

**The Profile of Study Area:**

Mariani is a geographically vibrant area under Jorhat district of Assam. As per Census 2011, there are 86 villages under the Mariani Revenue Circle. The total population under the Mariani Revenue Circle is 1,31,613 out of which 66,585 are males while 65,028 are females as per 2011 Census. Nearly 15.8% people of Mariani Revenue Circle lives in urban areas while 84.2% people live in rural areas. 2.3% people of Mariani Revenue Circle belong to SC community while 1.5% people belong to ST community. There are total 4,684 families under the Mariani Revenue Circle. The urban literacy rate of Mariani Revenue Circle is 89.91% and the rural literacy rate of Mariani Revenue Circle is 70.01%. There are sixteen Gaon Panchayats under Mariani Revenue Circle.

**Analysis:**

**Nature of Elected Women’s Participation in Village Panchayat:**

The institution of family plays an important role in the actual participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Very often it is said that husband conducts the panchayat meeting and take the decision for the panchayat and wife put their signature or thumb in the official documents. As per my
research is concerned, out of 13 women representatives 10 respondents agreed that their husband helps in performing the official activities of panchayats. Husbands or male relatives come along with the women representatives in panchayats meetings to carry them, helps in filling up of official documents and even taking decisions. It indicates that around 77% of women representatives depend on their husband or male relatives in performing their official duties.

The ambition of contesting in the panchayat election among the women is found very low. It is found that women are not interested to involve in politics. Thus, the nature of contest to the women reserved seat is very negligible. Out of 13 elected women 11 women own the panchayat election by contesting with only 1 candidate and remaining 2 women own by contesting with only 2 candidates. It represents that around 85% women representatives own the election by contesting with single woman candidate and 15% women representatives own the election by contesting with two women candidates.

In most cases whenever a seat goes for women reservation the local political leaders generally project their wife or daughter in law to contest in the reserve seat. But my research shows a reverse picture. It is found that 92% of elected women do not have any political background and only 8% of elected women have political background in their family.

One of the most important aspects of nature of women participation in the said village panchayats is that almost all the women made their entry in panchayat in the middle and later age of their life. The age factor of all the selected respondents are 30s 40s and even late 50s. Similarly, so far as marital status of elected women is concerned all are married and have children. The absence of unmarried girls indicates that young and unmarried girls are not encouraged to participate in the panchayat politics. Further, most of them do not have any kind of previous political experience and exposure since they have made their entry in panchayat for the first time. 92% women representatives are new in panchayat and do not have any political experience. The increase number new representatives indicate that either they are not interested to contest in the next panchayat election or not able to win the election for the second term.

The very primary purpose of reservation of seat for women in panchayat is to facilitate women to take part in the decision making process at the grass-root level. The opinion of the women that they express in panchayat meeting has much significance in solving the problems they faced. Therefore, the women need to articulate and vocal about their problems of their locality. In this regard it is found that 92% of the women representatives express their own opinion regarding the local issues in the panchayat meetings. Some of them alleged that importance is given to the members belonging to ruling political party while ignores the opinions of other members in the panchayat meetings.

Empowerment of women is the vital motto behind the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. It makes women enable to question, promote to participate, enhance bargaining power, and facilitate to articulate about their rights. But ignorance of one’s own rights and responsibilities do not bear any fruits of empowerment. It is found that most of the elected panchayat women members are not aware about their role, responsibility, rights and duties. Even they are not aware about the number of panchayat meetings
held in a year. Even they missed the panchayat meetings due to family burdens and illness of their children.

**Factor Affects in Contesting Panchayat Election:**

The provision of 1/3rd reservation for women is the vital force behind the women's participation in panchayat election. There are some crucial factors that also affect women’s participation to contest in the panchayat elections. The reason of contesting in the panchayat election is different from candidate to candidate. The women who have been contested and own the election are influenced by the following factors in the following frequency:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own decision</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision of Political Party</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision of Family</td>
<td>15%</td>
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Source: Interaction with the selected respondents from the selected areas.

It is found that out of 13 respondents, 5 respondents view that the decision of contesting in the last panchayat election is their own decision to hold power and to prove their identity. 6 respondents stated that they have contested in the panchayat election due to the decision of different Political Parties. They also assert that they have contested in the panchayat election for the purpose of identifying the local problems and developing the local areas. While two respondents gives their view that they contested in the panchayat election due to the decision of their family. They also said that they have contested in the panchayat elections due to the unavailability of women candidates.

**Factor Affects in their Efficiency:**

The direct and indirect causes that affect the efficiency of women representatives are not difficult to find out. It is found that 15% of women representatives agreed to contest in the next Panchayat election whereas 15% of the women representatives are doubtful and 70% of the women representatives are not interested to contest in the next Panchayat election. However, they asserted certain factors which adversely affect their functioning efficiency. The factors are:

- **Family burden:** Family burden is one of the major obstacles of women’s full concentration in the works of panchayats. Women have to bear the full responsibility of household chores due to gender based division of labour in the family. Almost 92% women representatives expressed their view that they have to perform official tasks as well as the family activities which increase their workloads. Bearing household responsibility affects on the effectiveness of their official tasks.

- **Unfavourable Political culture:** Unfavourable Political culture is another important factor that adversely affects women’s working efficiency in panchayats. Now the political process becomes complicated and
decisions are taken behind scene. The use of alcohol, money and mussel power and male dominance in panchayat makes them feel isolated and unadjusted. Cent percent women representatives do not like the use of these malpractices panchayats.

- **Financial Condition**: The use of money from parliamentary to panchayat election has become a common feature of Indian electoral politics. To contest even in the gram panchayat election, the financial condition of the candidate is also taken into consideration. All the respondents are mostly dependent on their husband or male family members so they do not dare or even think to contest in the panchayat election without the financial help from their family. So, after getting elected they cannot work independently and have work under the guidance of the family.

- **Lack of consciousness**: Most of the elected women are not aware about their roles and responsibilities due to illiteracy and ignorance. Around 46% elected women’s educational qualification is below matriculation. Due to low education level they cannot work effectively and even fail to realize the importance of their participation in decision making process.

**Problems Faced by Elected Women Members in Village Panchayat:**

Just to win in the panchayat election is not the end. The position they enjoy and the importance given to them in the panchayat meeting is a real issue. Very often it is said that they are not given adequate space to raise their question in panchayat meeting, their views and opinions are ignored. If any woman dares to express her view and raise question she is being mocked by the male members. They are publicly mocked for their minor mistakes. Thus, some women members preferred the informal ways, where they express their grievances after the formal meeting gets over. It is found that 46% respondents express that they get adequate opportunity to express their voice and their opinion also gets equal importance as par with men while 54% women representatives are of the opinions that their issues and concerns do not get adequate importance as par with male members in the panchayat meetings. The family burden is another problem faced by the elected women representatives. It is said that they cannot escape from household responsibilities. They have to take care children, their education, and health and even have to go paddy field to help their husband. More than 92% respondents said that they give their first preference to perform their household activities and then they focus on their official activities. Sometimes the elected women could not attend the panchayat meetings due to family responsibilities, health issue and other personal problems. According to my research around 39% of women representatives could not attend all the panchayat meetings due to the above mentioned reasons. It is also said that sometimes their husband or the male relatives participate in the panchayat meetings on behalf of them. It is found that around 31% of women representatives agree that their husband attends the panchayat meetings on behalf of them.
**Findings:** The study found that the competitiveness of women participation in village panchayat is very low. In all cases women own the village panchayat election by contesting with only one woman candidate except in two seats. The presence of male dominance can also be connected with the performance of women representatives. Although, they do not have political background still they are elected because of the status of their husband or family. The husband or the male relative attends the panchayat meeting, take decisions, put their views and even perform the official works. Thus, women representatives work as proxies for men’s views which practically bear little meaning of women’s reservation in PRIs. The study found that unmarried and young girls are not interested to involve in village panchayat politics. Majorities of them do not have previous political experience which indicates that they face anti-incumbency wave during the village panchayat election. Factors like individual decision, pressure from family and decision of political parties influence in the process of women’s participation in panchayat. But the dominance of political parties in the selection and election of women candidates make women uncomfortable to participate in Panchayat election which challenges the very notion of participatory democracy and democratic decentralization. Besides, family burden, unfavourable political culture, financial condition and low level of educational adversely affect the working efficiency of elected women. Further, it is found that members from ruling political party is given importance and listen their grievances in the panchayat meetings while ignores the concerns of other members. The patriarchal thinking and structure also affects women’s participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Politics seems not to be the cup of tea for women and they are supposed to confine within the household. The society has negative view about the capacity of women leadership. It is also found that they are able to sensitize the local problems like poverty, health, nutrition, education and use of alcohol, abuse, and domestic violence to a considerable extend. As per the findings is concerned the involvement of women in panchayat enables them to know the local problems and how to solve these. It enhances their leadership qualities of how to give speech, arrange a meeting and co-operate with local people and thus, gain political knowledge and experience. They also viewed that coming to the panchayat make them aware about the government policies and also know how to perform the official works of the government.

**Way Forward:** - It is said that mere reservation policy shall not solve the problems unless women members are given commensurate power to function efficiently. So, for better involvement of women in PRIs the following measures can be taken:

- The gender based division of work is a great concern of our society. An attitudinal change is required in both men and women. The concept that women are for only caring and nurturing of family needs to be replaced by the concept of equal citizenship.
- The media both print as well as electronic can play a vital role in restructuring the rural society. The media should act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice.
- Incentives play a vital role in ensuring more participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. It
has been noticed that there are very active and enlightened women leaders at all the levels of panchayat, who have been successfully implementing the developmental schemes and ensured over all development of their areas. Such women leaders need to be encouraged by providing them awards and publicizing their leadership qualities and honoring them in public meetings. It will certainly encourage other women in rural areas.

- The government should organize special training and workshop programmes for women representatives to boost up their self-confidence. Besides, the genuine and concern NGOs should be identified and entrusted them with the task of training, encouraging, organizing, emblazing and guiding the elected women representatives.

- The government should make special provision to provide more powers to women representatives than their male counterparts to enhance their efficiency and self-confidence.

- The women should also be given more freedom to mobilize and organize themselves. It can act as a catalytic agent for encouraging women’s participation in social and political activities.

- The school level curriculum should be so modified as to promote gender sensitivity among the students.

**Conclusion:** - Women constitute almost half of the total population but they are kept away from health, nutrition, education, socio-economic and political spheres. Thus, deny of women's priorities indicate ignoring the importance of almost fifty percent of total populations of the country. The 1/3rd reservation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions is a noble attempt to bring women empowerment. Participation of women in the village based organizations made significant changes in their social status as well as their position within the family. Further, participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions is a clear indication of change in the traditional belief system that restricted women's movement to involve in socio-economic and political activities of the society. It also gives them an opportunity to work in groups on project of common interest, associate with the on-going development programmes, articulate their needs, enhance their leadership quality and enable them to participate in decision making process. However, the society still has to go ahead to achieve full women empowerment and gender equality. Mere reservation will not solve the problem unless women members are given commensurate powers to function effectively. Co-ordination from different sections of the society such as male gentry, religious heads, and political leaders is necessary to sustain equality in the society. Everyone of the society needs to work to establish a better socio-economic set up so that men and women could become as an equal agent of overall developmental process of the country.

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