

FACTORS HINDERING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION IN HAWALBAGH BLOCK OF ALMORA DISTRICT

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to know the extent of participation of women of Almora district of Uttarakhand state in panchayati raj institution. Stratified random sampling was applied in order to select the gram panchayat. Out of eleven blocks in Almora district Hawalbagh block was selected for the study and a sample of 75 elected women representatives were selected for the study. This study shows that the involvement of elected women representatives in panchayati raj is still in the darkness of traditional culture. They do turn up of in large numbers for voting but lag behind in other activities of political participation.

Keywords: Political Interest, Involved Participation, Awareness

Introduction

The Constitution (73rd Amendment Act) 1992 may be termed as historic one in the evolution of Indian polity since Independence for variety of reasons. By this an attempt was made to actualise the aspirations of the framers of our Constitution contained in Article 40 and 46 of the Constitution of India, a major step was taken in strengthening the democracy of grass-root level ensuring democratic decentralisation, local participation in development programmes and considerable devolution of functions, resources and powers to panchayati raj institutions, a structural change was made in the arrangement of institutions of democratic governance according Constitutional status to panchayati raj institution and stretching a national continuum from the village to the Central Government and, opportunity to rise in politics was provided to those sections of our population who had earlier been denied access to political power for the reason of the social structure of rural India incorporating. The provisions of reservation in elected offices of panchayati raj institutions and women find a place in this scheme of reservations. One-third of the elected offices in panchayati raj institutions are reserved for women after this act in all states. The announcement of the implementation of panchayati raj system in Uttarakhand was carried out during November 1996. And, it took about two months in the identification and fixation of criteria for the reservation of seats for women in the three tier system of panchayats and the finalisation of various formalities for the implementation if the panchayat raj system.

Past Research

It is customary before embarking upon a study of a problem to look into the existing literature on the chosen subject in order to outline a design of the methodological formulations which have informed the discussion of the problem under study. It is hoped that this survey of literature will provide a focus to the empirical investigation reported in this study.

Prabhat Dutta (1997) examines the problems and prospects of political empowerment of rural women through participation in panchayats. He says that women's empowerment in panchayats depends upon the breaking of feudal - patriarchal structure in the villages. He suggests sustained campaign and vigorous efforts for creating awareness of rights and duties of women representatives. He concludes by saying that reservation to women members in panchayats is not end but a means to an end.

Vaidya (1997) examines the role of panchayati raj institutions in women's development for effective participation in decision-making process and for change in behaviour and attitudes of rural women after their entry into panchayats. The study finds that women take a longer time to prove equally capable as men. The study points out that the policy of reservation for women is not an end but a step forward in promoting women's participation in the grassroots democracy.

Nirmala Buch (2000) focuses on women in panchayats in the colonial period and after independence i.e., pre and post Seventy - Third Constitutional Amendment. Focussing on women in panchayats in the colonial period, she says that women were given neither voting nor candidature in panchayats. After independence, women were given token representation. This trend continued till the implementation of the Seventy – Third Constitutional Amendment except in a few states.

Nupur Tiwari (2008) in her research paper analyses the impact of panchayati raj institutions on women, the article argues that the traditional institutions of local governance have not created adequate space for women. Harsukhjit Kaur (2008) in her article discusses the role perception and performance by the women panchayat leaders and articulates the picture that emerges out of the ground reality.

Kaul and Sahni (2009) explore the extent of political participation of elected women representatives in panchayats and the problems faced by them in two districts of Jammu and Kathua.

Artatrana Gochhayat (2013) in his study of Hindol Block in Dhenkanal District of Odisha revealed that political participation of women in the functioning as well as in the electoral process of the panchayats is not satisfactory. Most of the women have great apathy towards politics.

Vikas Nandal (2013) in his study revealed that the participation level of women in gram panchayat remains very limited. Females are usually guided by their family members in gram panchayat elections.

Raj Kumar Sharma and Pankaj Sharma (2014) in his case study of Solan and Kandaghat (Himachal Pradesh) found that secondary (middle and matric) educated women have a greater representation. But illiterate and primary educated women are also occupying the political seats in the panchayat. The illiterate is still having a negative impact as the illiterate respondents face troubles while doing their official business/work. Women from the reserved category are participating in greater number which may change the equation in panchayat electoral politics.

Ashok Kumar H and H. M. Mohan Kumari (2014) in the study presents the structure and functions of panchayati raj institutions they also highlight the social composition of elected members and their participation in the decision making process in panchayati raj institutions.

Shruti I.L (2014) in her study makes an attempt to review the role of print and electronic media in empowering elected women representatives in panchayati raj institutions, with a special focus on Taluk panchayat members in Bellary district of Karnataka.

Sudipta Biwas (2016) in her study has made an attempt to analyse the concept of empowerment, how to measure it, strategies for empowerment of women and assess the role of panchayats in participation as well as empowerment of women she also suggest some effective measures to achieve that goal.

K Srivalli (2018) in his research paper examines the political empowerment of women with special reference to panchayati raj institutions in India and analyses the reasons for women's low level of participation and make suggestion for their effective participation of women at grassroot level in India.

Objectives

The chief objectives of this study were:

- (1) To understand and report the socio-economic and educational background of the elected women representatives to gram panchayats of the area under study.
- (2) To explore the awareness, interest, and involvement of women in gram panchayat elections.
- (3) To throw light on the factors that hinder women participation in panchayati raj.
- (4) To suggest suitable measures for the empowerment of women in gram panchayats.

Methodology and Sample Coverage

The present study has been conducted in Almora district of Uttarakhand state. Data was collected through both primary and secondary sources. Primary data which was the base of the study was collected by interview schedule. Stratified random sampling was applied in order to select the gram panchayats. There are eleven blocks in district Almora so I selected only one block, i.e., Hawalbagh Block where there are 124 gram panchayats. Out of 124 gram panchayats, 15 gram panchayats i.e. were selected on a random basis. A sample of 75 women members of gram panchayat was randomly drawn.

Results and Discussions

(I) Socio-Economic Profile

The socio-economic profile is vital to any study as it helps in building a comprehensive and complete picture of the respondents. Several socio-economic factors have been taken into account that gives a good idea about the background and the profile of the women gram panchayat members under study. The individual profile is derived by looking at factors such as age, educational level, marital status and annual income of the respondents.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Age	Young age (18-30)	14	18.66
	Middle age (31-50)	52	69.33
	Aged and above	9	12.00
Education	Illiterate	32	42.66
	Below Matriculation	25	33.33
	Matriculation and above	12	16.00
	Graduation and above	6	8.00
Occupation	Housewife	32	42.66
	Government jobs	0	0
	Daily Labourer	17	22.66
	Agriculture	26	34.66
Marital Status	Married	43	57.33
	Unmarried	32	42.66

Source: Present survey

The above table shows that majority of the women were from middle aged category (69.33 per cent) followed by young age category (18.66 per cent) those who participated in panchayat affairs. Only 12 per cent were from aged category. It may be stated here that age factor is off course a significant factor. A matured age reflects quite sound and reasonable views inconformity with the needs and necessities warranted by the circumstances. One's educational background may very well influence significantly one's political attitude. Educational achievement of the members may well channelize their interest towards the desired goal which may contribute to the inducement of new status elements among women. As presented in Table 1 majority (42.66 per cent) of the respondents interested in politics were found to be illiterate. It was very interesting to note that the spirit of women in politics was found to decrease with their rising level of educational attainment. Hence it may be inferred here that lower educational background of women held more influence in directing members to politics. With the attainment of relatively higher education, these women were found to be moving away from interests concerning political issues. The occupational status of

the members depicts a gloomy picture. Most of them were housewives and were economically dependent on their husband or family. Majority (viz. 43) of the members were married while 32 members were unmarried that indicates that the women members were motivated by their husbands or family to contest in the election.

(II) Political Interest

The following section attempts to describe the political interests of the respondents. The extent of interest of the women in political talks, election results, political events, local problems is taken as an indicator of their political interest

Table 2: Respondent's Interest in Politics

Interest	Total Respondents	Number	Percentage
Interest in Politics	75	19	25.33
Interest in people's talk during elections	75	17	22.66
Interest in election results	75	27	36.00
Interest in political events	75	19	25.33
Interest in local problems	75	19	25.33

Source: Present survey

The conclusion that can be drawn from these responses is that while a fair number of women are interested in politics, the significantly large body of the respondents are politically dormant or apathetic. If anything, their interest in politics is weak. These observations indicated the principal constraints that determine the degree of interest in politics among the respondents. Evidently what accounts for a low degree of interest in politics amongst them is their pre-occupation with domestic responsibilities which take up most of their time, leaving little time for any long-term interest in politics.

(III) Involved Participation

In modern democratic society, interest in politics and actual participation of members in politics are generally manifested through several kinds of behaviour, among these participation of women in political activities like public meetings, election campaigns, and participation in village political life are very common. Here the real involvement of women in politics in relation to status was measured in terms of the women actual or active participation.

Table 3: Respondent's Involvement in Political Activities

Variables	Total Respondents	Number	Percentage
Participation in decision making	75	13	17.33
Participation in election campaign	75	48	64.00
Participation in election meetings	75	12	16.00
Interaction with officials	75	9	12.00

Source: Present survey

The response to the question regarding the participation in election meetings was given in affirmative manner by only 12 female respondents, rest of the females respondents reported participation of their husband/ father in law/son in election meetings on their behalf. There is a problem of traditions and culture that restrict our interviewed respondents to actively involve themselves in politics. Female respondents especially in the rural areas are not convinced with the idea of working side by side with men. As far as participation in decision making is concerned it has been noticed that only 13 (17.33 per cent) members took part in this activity .The reason for such a low level of participation by the female respondents in this activity

is lack of relevant knowledge regarding work of panchayati raj. As far as participation in election campaign is concerned an overwhelmingly majority participated in this activity. It was found during the study that very few females interacted with the officials. It was reported to us by our respondents that usually male members in their families do not think them capable enough to handle any big responsibilities.

(IV) Awareness

To get a proper estimate of the level of political awareness of the female respondents they were asked few questions, the responses of the respondents are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Respondent's Political Awareness

Awareness	Total Respondents	Number	Percentage
Knowledge of minimum age for voting	75	42	56.00
Knowledge of 73 rd Amendment Act	75	18	24.00
Knowledge of Reservation	75	20	26.66
Knowledge of 3 tier system	75	18	24.00
Knowledge of gram panchayat	75	22	29.33
Knowledge of its power and functions	75	12	16.00

Source: Present survey

The results revealed that most of the respondents were aware about the minimum age for voting (56 per cent). The results of table 4 reveals that awareness of respondents about 73rd amendment was very poor. The study also found that only 24 per cent of respondents have knowledge about 3-tier system. As far power and functions of panchayati raj was concerned, only 16 per cent respondents were fully aware about its powers and functions, rest of respondents were not aware.

Factors Hindering Political Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj in Hawalbagh Block

In the traditional Kumauni society, the issue of equal status and equal participation of women in politics is not very encouraging. The Constitution of India under "Article 14 confers equal rights and opportunities on men and women in the political, economic and social spheres", and under "Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste etc." confers equality to women in every field still there exists a hiatus between constitutional guarantees and the realities of the life of the women. However the various factors that have acted as deterrents to our respondents in participation in the political process have been discussed under two headings (a) socio-economic obstacles (b) ideological and psychological obstacles.

(A) Socio - Economic Obstacles

(i) Lower Socio-Economic Status: The basic factor hindering political participation of women in panchayati raj activities in our survey study is their lower socio-economic status. It was found during our study that majority of the respondents are in lower income groups i.e., below the poverty line. The females were found to concentrate in the informal economy, where they were found to be engaged in low-wage or unpaid as low-skilled or unskilled labour. The income which the women earn, however meagre, are usually seen by them and their families as an income to be spent on the family. Politics is increasingly becoming commercialized, the expense required for political participation such as election campaign expenditure or resources required to attend meetings, visit and interact with government officials, become an additional burden that the women cannot afford as revealed by those surveyed in the present study. A housemaid from Balta village on the question on participation of women in politics responded: "When whatever little I earn goes in feeding my family, how can I afford to think of participating in politics. Political reservation will give me a ticket to contest the election but for contesting election money is needed and how will I manage such a huge expense."

(ii) Lack of Knowledge/Awareness: Because of total or partial illiteracy or less education the respondents encountered in the present survey do not know what political participation is all about. The respondents due to illiteracy are unaware of their role, rights in development and welfare activities. An illiterate respondent from Basar gram panchayat when asked a question on knowledge of political reservation responded: “What do you mean by political reservation, and what benefit will I get if you say that political reservation will improve the condition of women”. The lack of knowledge and awareness due to illiteracy makes it harder for the respondents to acquire sufficient knowledge of politics.

(iii) The Dual Burden of Domestic Tasks and Professional Responsibilities: Balancing the family and political interests is the most common problem expressed by the interviewed women. Women in our survey work were found to engage in a large number of social activities (there is high visibility of women involved in all sorts of work in the fields and forests, in processing agricultural produce at home, tending the animals, fetching and carrying fuel, fodder, and water, working as labourers and maids in houses), thus, they neither have time nor resource in other activities and especially political activities. A female respondent from Badgat Bhatt responded: “I do not understand by what you mean by whether I am interested in politics or not because when I do not have enough time for myself, how can I say that I can engage myself in political activities. Politics is a luxury for those females who have plenty of free time.” A village pradhan from Dhari village responded: “I am a graduate settled in Haldwani, but when elections to village panchayat were held in my village I was pressurised by my family to contest the election. I won the elections but after winning I had to face great difficulties as I had to manage my family and my political post. I will try my best not to contest any elections in future”. So far as the respondents were concerned the pressure of domestic duties and responsibilities is one of the principle restraints that limit the degree of their interest in politics.

(B) Ideological and Psychological Obstacles

(i) Women’s Perception of Politics as a “Dirty Game”: The general attitude towards politics is another obstacle to women’s participation in political life. Though most of the respondents are aware of political reservation but they find that politics is dirty and corrupt thus they believe in keep themselves away from it. A respondent from Sarka village opined, “I was bribed as well as threatened not to contest the election by the opposition candidate who was rich, and I was so scared that I decided not to contest the election. I, therefore, feel that politics is a dirty game where only well-off and powerful people can survive, people like us who have no power and wealth can never ever dream of acquiring political power”. Corruption in the political system thus restrains our respondents from actively participating in politics.

(ii) Women Lack of Confidence: Lack of confidence in themselves and on their capacity is one of the main reasons for women under-representation in village panchayat. It was found during our empirical study that many women in rural areas were good in political activities as campaigners, organizers and support mobilizes, but they feared in contesting elections and from participating in political life. A literate respondent from the Basar reported: “Yes I am interested in politics but I feel that I am not capable enough to handle such a big responsibility”.

(iii) Male Chauvinist Thinking: The next important factor hindering our respondents in politics is male chauvinist thinking because in male dominated society the power is enjoyed by man in every field. Few respondents who were or had been engaged in active politics were forced to enter politics by their families (as the seats were reserved only for females) and after winning they were not allowed to attend any meetings, instead their husbands, father-in-law or another male family members took their place. It was reported to us by our respondents that usually male members in their families do not think them capable enough to hand any big responsibilities.

(iv) Traditional and Cultural Barriers: There is a problem of traditions and culture that restrict our interviewed respondents to actively involve themselves in politics. Female respondents in the rural areas are not convinced with the idea of working side by side with men. One of the respondent from Udyari village revealed, “when I do not have enough freedom to talk to male members of my families, and where my head is always covered with a sari, how I can think of talking to other male members in panchayats or even think of working with them”.

Conclusion and Recommendations

On the whole it may be concluded that the participation of women in the affairs of the panchayat administration is not satisfactory. They do turn up of in large numbers for voting but lag behind in other activities of political participation due to various reasons. The main recommendations have been drawn on the basis of the problems encountered and the hardships of the women seen during the course of the present survey work. Recommendations are organised under three heads, viz., the role of government, role of political parties and role of non-governmental organisation.

(A) Role of the Government

(i) In order to hasten political involvement of women it is crucial to realise the importance of training programmes. The government should provide information and training to elected women representatives in rural areas using information manuals, mobile training programs and through audio-visual mediums. The training programmes for the elected women representatives will certainly assist them to take up political and leadership positions. All these activities will not only empower the women but will also earn them respect in the society.

(ii) The government in order to ensure active political participation of women at local level should monitor the work of the elected women as well as should look into the factors hindering her working.

(iii) The formal education system should be altered to suit the requirements of the women in hilly region. The content of school curriculum should be such as to give greater emphasis on political education and knowledge of political rights. In view of the widespread illiteracy, ignorance, the situation of women cannot be enhanced unless females in the age group 18-40 are covered by adult education programme and are made aware of their basic rights and responsibilities.

(iv) The poor economic status of the women generally retards their active role in politics. Majority of the members are still leading a life of exploitation and humiliation. Usually the male members of the family migrate to urban areas and the females are left behind to look after the family. To assist their families female members usually engage themselves into most meagre jobs. To address this problem, efforts should be made by the government to grant financial assistance to poor families for setting up small business (leather work, basket making, weaving, candle making, and poultry).

(v) The type of education needed by the women should not just be the general type of education which does not prepare a person for the future, instead it should be vocational type of education which is skill based and provides the student knowledge and knowhow to lead an independent life.

(vi) Government should ensure that the facilities offered by the state should not be limited to the well-off section but should be passed on to needier people of the society so that others also benefit from the programmes and facilities. This would enable more political participation of the women, also as they would be freed from the shackles they are in at present.

(B) Role of Political Parties

(i) The political parties should recognize the importance of political reservation and should give party tickets to those women who are interested to contest elections. Party manifestoes should include gender equity as one of their goals and they should have a plan of action for its achievement as well.

(ii) The male party members should also try to motivate the women to be more politically active and take steps to enlist more women in their party as well.

(iii) Political parties in order to facilitate political participation of females should raise the political consciousness of the masses in the hills. For this political parties should organise workshops, mass meetings. Political parties should also sensitize party leaders and party workers about the issues of women by organising discussions sessions.

(C) Role of Non-Governmental Organisation

(i) The non-governmental organisation should also include in their agenda the political empowerment of women. A conscious effort should be taken by them to emphasize the issues of gender equity and women's empowerment in its correct perspective. Non-governmental organisations could undertake task of sensitising both men and women leaders at the grassroot level to women's issues, and form pressure and advocacy groups for the realization of gender equity.

(ii) Non-governmental organisation could also take up the task of making women aware of their potential political power and their contribution to the political process as voters.

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