

PATRIARCHY AND WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF PATRIARCHY UPON THE ELECTED WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN THE SELECTED GAON PANCHAYAT OF NALBARI DISTRICT, ASSAM

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ABSTRACT:

Equal representation of all – men and women by all other considerations – is one of the well-proclaimed objectives of democracy. Equal political rights conferred upon men and women are expected to address various structural challenges traditionally faced by the women in most of the developing countries like India. However, in countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh of South Asian region witness that women are suffering from various socio-cultural, political and economic challenges. In this context, this study aims to examine a research question: Does patriarchy have an impact upon the women representatives elected to local government bodies while performing their institutional duties and functions? The followed up question is: How does patriarchy influence the performance of the women representatives elected to local government bodies? Using qualitative approach, this study makes the needed empirical investigation and argues that gender norms and social structure have impact upon the women representatives elected to local government bodies. It draws its empirical lessons using the method of in-depth interview with the key respondents. The key respondents in this study include the women representatives elected to panchayati raj institutions, especially the Gaon Panchayat, the local government bodies in India. The researcher interviewed ten women representatives elected to Ghoga Gaon Panchayat, in the district of Nalbari, Assam. Empirical findings of the study find that women are more familiar with their day-to-day social life, especially associated to household activities such as caring children. Ongoing gender norms seem to function in the mindset of these women representatives.

Key Words: Democracy, Gender, Panchayati Raj Institution, Patriarchy, Representation, Women.

INTRODUCTION:

Equal representation of all – men and women by all other considerations – is one of the well-proclaimed objectives of democracy. Equal political rights conferred upon men and women are expected to address various structural challenges traditionally faced by the women in most of the developing countries like India. A sound democratic mechanism is required. Most of the developing countries with democracy have developed such mechanisms with provision for

reservation for women. However, in countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh of South Asian region witness that women are suffering from various socio-cultural, political and economic challenges (Richter, 1991). In this context, this study aims to examine a research question: Does patriarchy have an impact upon the women representatives elected to local government bodies while performing their institutional duties and functions? The followed up question is: How does patriarchy influence the performance of the women representatives elected to local government bodies? These questions are pertinent concerning these women representatives because they live in the same society that discriminates them on various grounds. Using qualitative approach, this study makes the needed empirical investigation and argues that gender norms and social structure have impact upon the women representatives elected to local government bodies.

This paper is organized in the following sections. Section 1 discusses the existing relevant literature on patriarchy, women and local government. Section 2 highlights the methodology of the study. Section 3 sketches the context of the study. Section 4 presents the findings and analysis of the study followed by recommendations. Section 5 summarizes the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PATRIARCHY, WOMEN AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In the beginning of the review of the literature, the study conceptualizes one of its key terms, i.e., patriarchy. This study, by patriarchy, refers to the “manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in a society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence and resources” (French, 1985: 239).

A set of existing scholarship argues that patriarchy and suffering of women are closely associated. Patriarchy has various impacts upon women, their life and activities. Scholars argue that women are considered weak – requiring protection – in a society trapped in patriarchy. In such society, women are not encouraged to enter into politics because politics is considered as a dirty game (Sarkar, 1997).

Another set of literature argues that patriarchy leads to non-recognition of women’s contribution in the form of unpaid but valuable works in a household (Jalal, 1991). Inferiority of women begins from the household. Women suffer from institutional political deprivation when they live in a society characterized by patriarchy (Neuback, 1996). Due to male dominance, women can play an inferior political role (Kottack, 2005). Women enter into politics when situation conditions that men cannot contest elections due to legal prohibition or death as witnessed in South Asian countries (Richter, 1991).

Some scholars argue that women do not act as prime decision makers because they are directed to play a role dictated by gender norms of society. Men, in household and society, act as the prime decision-maker where women are left in a marginalized position (Datta and Mishra, 2011). This has impact in their political life as well.

Some scholars relate patriarchy, women and their socio-political position in a society. The gender-based norms embedded in a society set avenues for male to dominate public sphere including politics, where women are put in a marginalized position (Rai, 2000; Philips, 1998). The status defined by gender becomes the form of cultural conduct to define behavior of men and women distinctly (Levant, 1996). And, when these standards are accepted in a society, it creates gender differences (Martin, 2004).

Scholars like Bari and Khattak argue that social structure and cultural norms restrict women to play active role in politics and other public sphere, leading to deprivation of rights (Bari and Khattak, 2001). Kazmi finds that women are more dependent on men which constrains their active participation in politics (Kazmi, 2000).

Some scholars demonstrate that active participation in politics pre-requires equality. Ballington writes: “The attainment of gender equality and the full participation of women in decision making are key indicators of democracy. The involvement of women in all aspects of political life produces more equitable societies and delivers a stronger and more representative democracy” (Ballington, 2008:5). The condition of women in India is improving to realize equality (Dalvi, 2010). However, in other socio-economic sectors such as education, health facilities, access to legal rights etc, women are lagging behind in most of the developing countries including India (Sheikh, 2009; Kazmi, 2005).

Schlozman and Verba argue that education is essential because it works as a ‘powerful predictor of political participation’ (Schlozman and Verba, 2001: 286). Lack of education, which is higher among the women in many of the developing countries, creates unequal social structures. Embedded patriarchy reinforces such cultural constraints. Exclusion of women from politics is, thus, fixed by patriarchy and associated social norms (Ibrahim, 2005). This is related to prohibitive dominant culture of a given society. Tripp argues: “The prohibitive cultural attitudes against women's involvement persist among both men and women. These are reflected in voting patterns, media coverage of female politicians, and even in blatant attempts to suppress women's assertion of their political rights and views” (Tripp, 1999: 6).

There are some scholars who argue that women are passive in politics. Cole and Sabik argue that feminine characteristics of women create passivity in their political life (Cole and Sabik, 2010). This is due to the ongoing social oppression and domination by the male section against the women in a given society (Jackman, 1994). In most of the cases, women, being guided by their gender roles, possess that political image and attitude which the male family members carry (Sigel, 1996). This limits their independent choice and interest in political sphere.

However, there are some critics who argue that a civil society can change political status and attitude of women. Kellow writes: “Civil society plays a vital role in furthering women’s participation in politics and elections. This involves advocating for policies that will increase space for women’s involvement, encouraging women to vote and serve as monitors in elections; supporting them to stand as candidates and run a campaign” (Kellow, 2010: 16). But, this type of encouraging civil society takes time to develop in a traditional society. So, we have to examine the impacts of patriarchy upon women to find out appropriate solutions. Drawing upon these sets of literature, this study assumes that patriarchy influences activities of women representatives elected to local government bodies.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

This study is based on qualitative approach. It draws its empirical lessons using the method of in-depth interview with the key respondents (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The key respondents in this study include the women representatives elected to panchayati raj institutions, especially the Gaon Panchayat, the local government bodies in India. The researcher interviewed ten women representatives elected to Ghoga Gaon Panchayat (GGP) in the district of Nalbari, Assam (Draft Status Report, 2016-2021).

The 61 No. Ghoga Gaon Panchayat under Barkhetri Development Block of Nalbari district consists of different socio-cultural and religious communities. It is located in 60 No. Barkhetri Legislative Assembly Constituency of Assam surrounded by Loharkatha in the East, Kandhbari Panchayat in the West, Village Dagapara in the North and Kurihamari Panchayat in the South. The official census of 2011 shows that there are 20489 total population in this Gaon Panchayat,

out of which 10317 and 10172 are males and females respectively (Census, 2011). Nalbari district, situated in the lower Brahmaputra Valley is one of the District of Assam covering an area of 1052 sq.km. It is surrounded by Baska district on the North, the Brahmaputra River on the South, Kamrup district on the East and Barpeta district on the West. According to 2011 census, there are 7.72 lakh population in the district out of which 3.96 lakh and 3.76 lakh are males and females respectively. The district of Nalbari consists of 7 development blocks, 65 gaon panchayats and 456 villages (Census, 2011). The profile of the respondent has been presented in the following table (Table 1).

From the profile of the respondents, it is seen that majority of them are from general category (90%) which includes both Hindus and Muslims. Only 10% of the respondents are from minority category. Here, minority caste refers only the Bengali Muslims excluding the Assamese Muslims though their religious faiths are same. Regarding religion, Islam consists of 70% and Hindu 30%. No respondent was found from other category.

Economic status of the respondents are categorized as Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL). As per their response, it was found that 40% and 60% are under BPL and APL category respectively. From the educational status of the respondents, it was found that majority of them i.e. 80% are within class 1 to 10th standard and only 20% of them have passed the Higher Secondary (HS) examination. Regarding party affiliation of the respondents, it was found that majority of them are from the Indian National Congress (INC). Only 10% of each from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Others respectively.

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents

Caste (%)		Religion (%)		Eco. Status (%)		Education (%)		Party Affiliation (%)		
Gen	Minority	Hindu	Islam	BPL	APL	I to X	HS	BJP	INC	Others
90	10	30	70	40	60	80	20	10	80	10

Source: Primary Data Collection

The study focuses on respondents' perspectives on femininity and representation. Thus, it presents a holistic view of the phenomena examined here (Hatch, 2002). The interviews were recorded with prior approval of the respondents. These were transcribed and then analyzed using a method of content analysis.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY:

Panchayati Raj Institutions are functioning in India as the local government bodies. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 revitalized the system of panchayati raj across the country. It provided for many revolutionary provisions, such as reservation for weaker section of society, regular elections to these bodies, and evolution of powers and functions to the grass roots level. The Amendment facilitated institutionalized democratic spaces for the women through the mechanism of reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Subsequently, women contested many elections and got elected to these bodies. However, the ongoing gender norms and social structures constraint independent activism of these women elected to Panchayati Raj Institutions, especially the Gaon Panchayat. Hence, this study aims to examine how patriarchy has an impact upon these women representatives elected to the Gaon Panchayat selected in the district of Nalbari. This paper contributes to literature on patriarchy, women empowerment and local government.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY:

This section presents the empirical findings of the study conducted in the Gaon Panchayat in the district of Nalbari. The results and related discussions are presented in the following sub-points.

Gender Roles: Public and Private Sphere

No one can ignore both – public and private sphere of life. The women representatives elected to the Gaon Panchayat as ward members or President have to negotiate in both these spheres of life. However, this study finds that traditional gender-based norms of society make them more obligatory to perform their household activities. This is evident from these words of a female representative who serves as a ward member: “I know that I am elected as a ward member and that I am assigned duties by the government. But, I, being a woman, cannot ignore my household activities. I do all my household activities first and then get ready to go to panchayat office. I cannot ask my husband to do my work in home.” This indicates that the women representatives are compelled to do their household duties.

Femininity: Female Perspective about Politics

The study tried to examine perspectives of the elected women representatives about politics. Empirical findings of the study find that women are more familiar with their day-to-day social life, especially associated to household activities such as caring children. Ongoing gender norms seem to function in the mindset of these women representatives. They think that politics is a male game. This is evident from these words of a woman representative elected to Gaon Panchayat level: “I am a woman. I have my family. I think I am not well-equipped in political field. I do not have problem to talk with other women representatives; but, I do not feel easy talking to my male colleagues in our office.” This specific familiarity develops in their mindset because of their day-to-day experiences in society where women often play a non-political role.

Male Dominance and Female Passivity in Politics:

The responses that the study gathered from the field show that local level political institutions, though democratic, are dominated by male representatives elected. The men representatives elected to Gaon Panchayat play a vital role in decision making at the grass roots level. Though elected and enjoy same powers, the women elected representatives are left with minimal political space in terms of decision making in these bodies. Dominant masculine force affects roles of these women representatives. However, this is notable that the women representatives do not encounter direct constraints from the male representatives. But, the female passivity rests in their mindset, implying that they do not want to bear more responsibilities in taking decisions because of the fear of public criticisms. This can be seen in these words of a woman representative: “I do not want to only criticize the male representatives for their active and dominant role in taking decisions in our Gaon Panchayat. In my case, I find it difficult to take a key role in decision making. I am scared of public criticisms if I do wrong. So, I prefer not to talk much in such meetings.”

Political Skills and Women Representatives:

Women representatives are considered incompetent. This is based on the notion that they lack required skills such as education. This is also carried on by the women representatives that I studied. A woman representative said: “I am new in politics. I do not have much knowledge and experience about politics. So, I ask my colleagues, especially the males to perform my duties. I trust them because they have knowledge.” This dependence seems dangerous because it may lead to over male domination in local government bodies. The study draws evidences that hegemonic male control over these bodies is prevalent that excludes women representatives in exercising their powers and functions independently.

Reservation and Women Political Representation:

Women, who are elected in reserved posts, are more inclined to follow what the males – from the family or institution – ask to do. This is witnessed with a little bit of exception. Though reservation helps women to fulfill their interests through the platform of the local government, social structure and embedded gender norms do not allow them to completely utilize their institutional position. This inability is more active when women do not have their own choice to enter into politics. A female representative reveals: “I did not have any political ambition to get elected into Gaon Panchayat. Previously, my husband worked as a representative in our Gaon Panchayat. However, due to reservation for women, he could not contest. He encouraged me to contest election. So, I am new in politics. He is still helping me in doing my work as a representative. Villagers in our Gaon Panchayat meet both us for their problems.” This is evident that men are the political architects at the local level where gender norms are embedded to leave minimal political space for the women. Women are asked to accept and follow decisions largely taken by the male counterparts. The sense of powerlessness of the women contributes to reinforcement of patriarchal tactics of dominance and control.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

From the findings and analysis of the present study on “*Patriarchy and Women Representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions: An Analysis of the Impact of Patriarchy upon the Elected Women Representatives in the selected Gaon Panchayat of Nalbari district, Assam*”, the following recommendations can be forwarded.

- To empower the women representatives, a strong socio-political support is the need of the hour.
- The women should be provided proper education with necessary facilities.
- They must be empowered economically for which the government should make necessary enactments.
- Awareness camps should be arranged to make them socio-politically strong as well as to change the mindset of the people who regard women as inferior.

CONCLUSION:

Equality is one of the basic elements of democracy where both men and women are regarded equal and independent in various aspects of their day to day life. Similarly, equal political rights conferred upon men and women are expected to address various structural challenges. However, gender norms and social structure have influenced upon the women representatives elected to local government bodies. Ongoing gender norms seem to function in the mindset of these women representatives. Men are the political architects at the local level where gender norms are embedded to leave minimal political space for the women. Women are asked to accept and follow decisions largely taken by the male counterparts. The sense of powerlessness of the women contributes to reinforcement of patriarchal tactics of dominance and control.

Like the previous studies, the present study also argues that women play an inferior political role as they live in a society where gender norms are embedded reinforcing their femininity at household level as well as in the society (Kottack, 2005; Neuback, 1996). Women enter into politics only when situation demands (Richter, 1991). Thus, the present study contributes to the literature of patriarchy, women representation and local self-government.

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