



Participation of Women in Panchayat Raj Institution: A Block Level Study of West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The West Bengal government passed amendment to the *panchayat* law introducing one third reservations for women, including Schedule Cast/Schedule Tribe (SC/ST) women, at all three tiers of the panchayati raj system. The first election with such reservation was held in year 1993. The present paper is an attempt to look into the women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institution. The main objective is to study how women members are able to and to what extent occupy seats of Panchayat Raj Institution. It also examines the position of lower class women in Panchayat Raj Institution. The study is based on results of various panchayati level elections in West Bengal and primary evidences collected from women *pradhans* and deputy *pradhans* in various gram panchayats of Haldibari block of Coochbehar district (as per 2008 election). The study reveals that political participation of women has increased in village panchayat level and extent of participation of SC women has been more than 33%. Out of 62 gram panchayats seats, 24 (38.70%) are won by female members. Out of 24 female members 18 members (75 %) come from SC community. In Permeckliganj and Uttar Bara Haldibari gram panchayat all women members are from SC community. So the study revealed that women belong to lower class community have greater chance in decision making process.

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INTRODUCTION

Panchayats have been the backbone of the Indian villages since the beginning of recorded history. In 1946 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the father of the India nation had aptly remarked that the Indian independence must begin at the bottom and every village ought to be a republic or Panchayat having powers. Gandhiji's dream has been translated into reality with the introduction of the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to ensure people's participation in rural reconstruction. For the interest of the weaker sections of the population including women, SCs, and STs, an amendment in the constitution of India took place in the year 1992. This 73rd amendment act marks a new era in the federal democratic set up of the country and provides constitutional status to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The main features of

the act are (i) A 3-tier system of Panchayati Raj for all states having population of over 20 lakh. (ii) Panchayat elections regularly in every 5 years. (iii) Reservation of seats for SC, ST and women (not less than 33% of seats). (iv) Appointment of state Finance Commission to make recommendations as regards the financial powers of the Panchayats and (v) Constitution of districts planning committees to prepare development plans for the district as a whole (Anonymous, 2002 and Ganguly, 2003).

The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution have impacted nearly 600 million Indian people in 500,000 villages. Interestingly the percentage of women at various levels of political activity has risen from 4-5% to 25-40%. Both nationally as well as at the state and local levels women in elected bodies have been very few and even those who have been elected when observed from closer quarters present a complex picture (Chandra, 2007). Empowerment of women is essentially the process of up-liftment of economic, social and political status of women who are traditionally underprivileged ones in the society. It involves the building up of a

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society wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure (Lal and Kumar, 2007). West Bengal (WB) is the fourteenth largest state in India in size (88,752 sq, km) with a population of 91,347,736 (Anonymous, 2011) of which 46, 927,389 males and 44, 420,347 females with the sex ratio of 947. The rural West Bengal accounts for a total population of 62,183,113(68%) out of which the total number of males and females are 31,844,945 and 30,338,168 respectively. Rural population of West Bengal comprises of 27.5% are SC and 7.8% are ST population (Anonymous, 2011).

The West Bengal government passed its own amendment to the panchayati law introducing one third reservations for women, including SC/ST women, at all 3 tiers of the panchayati raj system. The first elections with such reservation were held in 1993. In rural West Bengal the participation of women in public life has been traditionally lower than the national average, which was reflected in the representation of women in the panchayats before 1993 (Anonymous, 1993 and Anonymous, 2008). Only one or two women were co-opted in panchayats before 1992 in a group of 15 to 19 members. In the years between 1970 and the election of the Left-Front Government in 1977, elections to local self-governing bodies began only after 1977. Though there was reservation for the SC/ST in the state panchayat system. There was no provision for reservation of seats for women in the West Bengal panchayat act. There was a token inclusion of two women in every panchayat and if they were not elected, they could be nominated. The first three panchayat elections were held in W.B. in the year 1978, 1983 and 1988. In the year 1993, first time election was held with 33% reservation for women (Anonymous, 1998 and Bagchi, 2004). The study was conducted to find the extent of participation of women in panchayati raj institutions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study was conducted in Haldibari block of Coochbehar District of West Bengal state of India, situated at 26.33°N and 88.77°E. According to Anonymous, 2011, Haldibari had a population of 93,836 in rural area and 13,170 in urban area. In rural area, male constitutes 51.64% and female constitutes 48.35%. The density of population is 628 in rural area. The SC and ST population of Haldibari are 48,535 and 191 respectively. In rural area literacy rate is 61.54% (male is 72.72% and female is

49.44%). There are 62 villages and 6 gram panchayats under Haldibari block (Boxiganj, Uttar Bara Haldibari, Dakshin Bara Haldibari, Dewanganj, Permekliganj, Hemkumari). There are 62 seats in gram panchayat level, 15 seats in panchayat Samiti level and one seat in Zilla parishad level (Anonymous, 2003). The study is based on election results and primary evidence collected from women *pradhans* and deputy *pradhans* in various Gram panchayats of Haldibari block.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Outcome of panchayati election 2008 shows that the number of total seats of Haldibari block is 78, out of which 29 (37.17%) are occupied by women and men occupied 49 (62.82%) seats. There is only one seat in zilla parishad level (Table 1). The study reveals that out of 62 gram panchayats seats 24 (38.70%) seats are occupied by women. Out of 24 women members, 18 (75%) members come from SC community. In Dewanganj gram panchayat out of 10 members, 4 (40%) members are women and out of which 50% come from SC community. In Hemkumari and Boxiganj gram panchayat out of total 11 members, 4(36.36%) members are women and 75% women are from SC community in Hemkumari, 50% seats are occupied by female members of SC community in Boxiganj. In Dakshin Bara Haldibari gram panchayat out of 7 members, 3(42.85%) are women members and all are belong to SC community. In Permekliganj 75% women member are from SC community. In Uttar Bara Haldibari gram panchayat all women members are from SC community (Table 2). In panchayati samiti level, there is very high level of participation (80%) by SC community. Minority communities too are represented well. Women occupied 50 % of the seats at panchayat samiti level (Table 3). So it could be seen that women belonging to weaker section of society are taking a great part in decision making process. Several women also

Table 1: Outcome of 3-tier Panchayat Election-2008 of Haldibari Block

	Male	Female	Total
Zilla Parishad	1	--	1
Panchayat samiti	10	5	15
Gram panchayat	38	24	62
Total	49	29	78

Source: Compiled from data provided by Block Development Office, Haldibari and Report published by P&RD West Bengal-2010.

Table 2: Number of Elected members of Haldibari Gram panchayat-2008

Gram panchayat	Male					Female					Total
	SC	ST	Mino	GEN	Total	SC	ST	Mino	GEN	Total	
Dewanganj	6	--	--	--	6	2	--	1	1	4	10
Hemkumari	5	--	2	--	7	3	--	1	--	4	11
DakshinBara Haldibari	4	--	--	--	4	3	--	--	--	3	7
Permeckliganj	4	--	--	1	5	3	--	1	--	4	9
Uttar bara Haldibari	8	--	1	--	9	5	--	--	--	5	14
Boxiganj	5	--	2	--	7	2	--	2	--	4	11
Total	32	--	5	1	38	18	--	5	1	24	62

Source: Block Development Office, Haldibari

Table 3: Outcome of Panchayat Samiti Election-2008, Haldibari

	SC	ST	GEN	Minority	Total
Male	8	--	1	1	10
Female	4	--	--	1	5
Total	12	--	1	2	15

Source: Block Development Office, Haldibari

occupied office bearer post and they are also taking a great part in local decision making process.

The total population of Permeckliganj panchayat of haldibari block is around 13,266. The gram panchayat has 9 members out of which 4 are women and 5 are men. Smt. Shibani Roy has been elected as the pradhan. She is 43 years old and she studied upto class VIII. During study it was found that she was politically conscious and regularly presided over the gram panchayat meetings and also actively involved in deliberations that were carried out in the meetings. She often expressed her views over the issues raised their in .Though she was not fully conversant with the rules and regulations of the gram panchayat meetings/gram panchayat manual but still her awareness level was clearly a touch above other gram panchayat members. She had an idea of the major expenditures of the gram panchayat and could even tell us about some of the schemes that were being carried out for the poverty and unemployment eradication. She revealed that regarding the list of 100 days work, widows' allowance, old-age allowance, disability allowance which were making from local people by the gram panchayat but rupees were given from Block office. There were 140 SHGs in the panchayati out of which approximately 100 are female SHGs. Many of them rearing hen and some are engaged in cultivation of vegetables. Smt. Shibani Roy, Pradhan always presides over the meeting of SHGs.

Investigation in Boxiganj panchayati revealed that Anguma Khatun had been elected as pradhan of Boxiganj near Haldibari town. This Gram panchayat includes roughly 3,500 families. She was 40 years old and educated up to class IX. Her husband is a cultivator. She has 4 children. Her husband helps her for constituencies work. This is the first time she had been elected as pradhan. Her experience is limited. During her tenure as pradhan near about 118 homes had been given to the people from Indira Awas Yojona and 220 latrines had been given under subsidized rate .There are 130 SHGs and most of them are engaged in goat and hen rearing. She calls meetings only one time in every month. She emphasized on the need for education of children. She also wants to help for construction of school building if fund permits.

Smt. Suchitra Roy (SC), aged 34years is the upa-pradhan of Dakshin Bara Haldibari. She passed madhyamik. She has two children and her husband is a defense serviceman. She usually takes help of her son in law for constitutional work. She has a good knowledge about her constituency area. There are 1400 families in her constituency and she had sanctioned 18 homes under I.A.Y and 80 subsidized latrines. For the development of women she used to encourage people for the formation of SHGs and there are 16 SHG in the area. They make incense sticks and engaged in poultry rearing (Mookherjee and Bardhan. 2005).

Hajera Khatun (Minority) had been elected as deputy pradhan in Dewanganj gram panchayati. The population of the panchayati is around 10,000. She is 45 years old and there are 7 members in her family which includes her husband, 3 sons, one daughter and one daughter-in-law. She has passed class VIII. Her husband helps her in her work. She has one SHG and she mentors it. In absence of pradhan she conducts meeting of gram panchayat. Total 215 families got home from Indira Abas

Yojona and 422 BPL (Below Poverty Line) families got subsidized latrine. There are 35 applications pending at her hand till now. She conducts all the meetings of SHG, Family welfare scheme. There are 40 SHGs in the panchayati and most of them are women groups and they reared hen, goat. Some group prepared fried rice (Muri) and sold it (Sarkar, 2004).

Survey of Hemkumari gram panchayat revealed that the gram panchayat has 11 members, out of which 4 are women. Smt. Mini Adhikary is the deputy pradhan. She belongs to SC community. She has passed class VIII. Her husband helps her wife in various work of gram panchayati. She helps people to get SC/ST certificate. She also arranged to get tube-well, well, kitchen of primary school. Now she is in-charge of panchayat pradhan because pradhan, is in accused by some law. She mentors all the board meetings. During this period approximately 200 families got home and 200 families got subsidized latrine. There are 102 SHGs and most of SHGs are engaged in cow, goat rearing.

Uttar Bara Haldibari gram panchayat has 19,601 populations. Out of total population, 10,181 are male and 9420 female and out of total population, 13,878 are belongs to SC community (6,826 male and 7052 female). There are 4,718 families out of which 1,740 belong to BPL category. Sabitri Roy (SC) had been elected as deputy pradhan. She passed madhyamic examination (Class VIII). She is an ICDS worker and she has done the job sincerely when attending the general meeting. She mentors one meeting in every week about health. There are 110 SHGs. She is well-known about how many people have got old-age allowance, widow allowance, and bikalanga bhata.

From the study it is evident that age of all gram panchayat women members fall in the middle age group (35-50 years). Nearly all the women gram pradhans / deputy pradhans/ panchayats are class VIII passed with a very poor understanding and knowledge of the gram panchayat manuals, their rights and responsibilities. They are even unaware of the major sources of revenue of the gram panchayats. Implementing land reforms, identifying beneficiaries for land transfers, IRDP loans, agricultural extension programs, employment programs (such as NREP, RLEGP, JRY) housing and other welfare programs, raising local revenues from taxes and non-tax sources and administering local infrastructure projects. (Bardhan and Mookerjee, 2005) Most of the women are housewives and are economically dependent on their male counter part. There is only one member, who is in service (as ICDS worker). The political experience of

the female member shows that most of the members joined in the politics at the time of election 2008. In this context members are also asked about the reason or motivation behind joining politics. Majority members have indicated that they have joined politics after being motivated by their family. Most of them said that their husbands helped them regarding their Constituency work. Most of the female pradhans/ Upa-pradhans actively participate in the meeting of the gram sabha and are involved in the decision making process but 50% of the members do not put any demand before the general meeting of the gram panchayat. This may happen either due to their lack of awareness about their duties and responsibilities or due to lack of education. They also have taken a great role in local decision-making process. But in spite of these opportunities they are not performing up to the mark due to their lack of education, family workload, and immobility, ignorance regarding rules and regulations of gram panchayat and lastly male dominance over them. Another one of the most important reasons is the patriarchal society

CONCLUSION

From the angles of people's eye though there are some against voice but majority of the people informed that women members as well as male members communicate regularly with the people. Most of the activities done by the women members are scheme oriented. They are functioning as the agent of the govt. for the implementation of the scheme. Regarding the flow of information women members play a crucial role. Survey indicates that in this patriarchal and male dominated society it will take time for women members to have the confidence of others in the neighborhood.

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