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WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION IN WEST BENGAL

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Abstract:

Women's political participation is a key component of Panchayati Raj Institution. It's unfortunate that women participation in the decision making process through the Panchayati Raj Institution is inadequate. Recognizing this fact the Government of India is taking active stapes to encourage the participation of women in policy making, notable by establishing quotas for women and disadvantages sections through passing the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The significance of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 is that is not only institutionalized the Panchayati Raj System, but also initiated India's largest exercise in democratic decentralization. The present study seeks to explore the level of women political participation in the grassroots democratic institution in West Bengal.

INTRODUCTION

Participation, as defined in a UNESCO document, is 'collective sustained activities for the purpose of achieving some common objectives, specially a more equitable distribution of the benefit of development (UNESCO, 1979). Participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. (Human Development Report, 1993, pp. 21). The Human Development Report 1993 puts it, any proposal to increase people's participation must pass the empowerment test-does it increase or decrease people's power to control their lives? This test applies to all institutions that organize or affect human lives. Women's participation in political process is important for strengthening democracy and for their struggle against marginalizing, trivialization and oppression. Emergence of women as a strong group would change the prevailing political practices, the nature and content of debates in the legislature and women's issue can be taken care of from the feminist perspective both in policy formulation and implementation.

INTERNATIONAL CONDITION OF WOMEN

Since 1990, the Human Development Report of the UN focused attention on the need to put the people at the centre of development. In spite of that poverty, hunger and disease remain widespread and women and girls continue to comprise the majority of the world's poorest people. The real conditions of women in international scenario are as follows:

Of the 192 countries in the world, only 12 have a female head of state.

Seventy per cent of the world's 1.3 billion poor-those who are living on the equivalent of less than US\$1 per day-are woman.

Women spend twice as much time as men (or more time) on unpaid work.

Worldwide, women on average earn two-thirds of what men earn.

Women make up the majority of the world's part-time workers-between 60 per cent and 90 per cent. In the

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European Union, 83 per cent of part-time workers are women.
 In countries such as Australia, Canada, Thailand, and the United States, over 30 per cent of all businesses are now owned or operated by women, with Thailand topping the list at almost 40 per cent.
 In some countries of sub-Saharan Africa, most of the female labour force is in the informal economy; for example, 97 per cent in Benin, 95 per cent in Chad, 85 per cent in Guinea, and 83 per cent in Kenya.
 In Europe, women are the heads of household in nine out of ten single parent families.
 Women possess roughly one per cent of the land in the world.
 Today only six countries can boast the following: close to complete sexual equality in the area of secondary education, 30 per cent representation of women in elected government positions, roughly 50 per cent of non-agricultural jobs occupied by women.
 In nearly 100 years, only 24 women have been elected as head of state.
 Around 80 per cent of the 27 million refugees around the planet are women.
 Two-thirds of the 300 million children who have no access to education are girls.
 Out of almost a billion, people who are unable to read and write, two-thirds of them are women.
 Over 200,000 women die every year as a result of back street abortions.
 Women produce 80 per cent of the food in the poorest areas in the world; in some places, this figure is as high as 95 per cent.
 Officially, 110 million girls worldwide between the ages of 5 and 14 work, and this does not include domestic tasks. (Baylis and Smith 2005)
 It is estimated that nearly 1300 million persons in the world are poor and nearly 70% of them are women. In Developing Countries, women bear an unequal share of the burden of poverty, which has become a major hurdle for their empowerment. Today, as many as 30% to 35% rural households are women headed and their meager incomes make them more vulnerable to the extremes of poverty and its consequences. (Krishan 2001)

CONDITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA:

In the era of globalization, India has emerged as a new economic power of the World. But after six decades of independence, higher maternity and infant mortality rates, lower age of marriage, widespread illiteracy, and higher dropout rate from schools and lower work participation rates, Indian women are one of the most disadvantaged groups in the society (Gopalom 2002). The 2011 Census shown that the sex ratio of India is 933, which may be, are lowest in the World. A percentage of female literacy is 65.5 against male literacy of 82.14 per cent. Work participation rates for women in India are much lower than that of men. Work participation rates for women is still far behind the work participation rates for men (Census 2011). In India, at the end of the ninth five year plan 26.1% of the population was living below the poverty line. In the rural area 27.1% of the population was living under poverty. The overall unemployment rate estimated to be 7.32%. The female unemployment rate is 8.5%. The rate of growth of women unemployment in the rural area is 9.8%. This is because of the low growth rate of new and productive employment. At the end of the 9th plan the rate of growth of employment was only 2.47%.

The growing social awareness across the globe has brought a number of issues to the fore among which gender equality and empowerment of women are very significant. Discrimination against women in the form of male-female differentiation constitutes the core of the gender biased system.

EVIDENCE OF DISPARITIES FACED BY WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS

In Constitution of India based on the principles of equality and guarantees equality before law and equal participation to all its citizens. It not only guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, but also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth. As such, women have been denied social, economic, civil and political right in many spheres.

An important area where women have been inadequately represented is in the political sphere. Article 325 and 326 of the Constitution of India guarantee political equality, equal right to participate in political activities and right to vote respectively. While the latter has been accessed, exercised and enjoyed by a large number of women, the former, i.e., right to equal political participation still a distant dream. Lack of space for participation in political bodies has not only resulted in their presence in meager numbers in their decision making bodies but also in the neglect of their issues and experiences in policy making.

Women participation in formal politics can be gauged by examining them in relation to the following indicators: women participation in the Parliament, Legislative Assemblies, institutions of local governance and political parties and their participation in the electoral process as Candidates as well as candidates. The analysis of these indicators reveal both that historically women have been kept away from

politics and political parties as well as other formal institutions have not validated their participation.

Table 1: Participation of Women in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha

Year	Members in Lok Sabha			Members in Rajya Sabha		
	No. of Seats	No. of Women	Percentage	No. of Seats	No. of Women	Percentage
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1952-57	499	22	4.4	219	16	7.3
1957-62	500	27	5.4	237	18	7.6
1962-67	503	34	6.7	238	18	7.6
1967-71	523	31	5.9	240	20	8.3
1971-76	521	22	4.2	243	17	7.0
1977-80	544	19	3.4	244	25	10.2
1980-84	544	28	5.1	244	24	9.8
1985-90	544	44	8.1	245	28	11.4
1990-91	529	28	5.3	245	24	9.7
1991-96	509	36	7.1	245	38	15.5
1996-97	537	34	6.3	245	20	8.2
1997-98	545	40	7.3	245	19	7.8
1998-99	545	44	8.1	245	19	7.8
1999-2004	245	48	8.8	245	20	8.2
2004-2009	543	44	8.1	-	-	-

Source: Election Commission in India. (www.eci.gov.in)

In the Lok Sabha, there has been a marginal increase in the percentage of women in relation to the total number of seats. However, it has at no elections between 1952 to date exceeded 10 percent. In the Rajya Sabha, their population remains constant at about 8 percent of the total seats. The exception has been the 1991-1996 elections wherein their representation was at 15.5 percent. The trend after has been one of decline stagnation at around 8 percent, indicating a continued marginalization of women in these institutions.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN STATE LEGISLATURES:

Table 2: Male-Female Representation in Selected State Assemblies

State	Latest year's which date is available	Total	Male	Female	Female Percentage
1	2	3	4	5	6
Andhra Pradesh	1999	294	266	28	9.52
Arunachal Pradesh	1999	60	59	01	1.67
Assam	1996	122	116	6	4.92
Bihar	2000	324	305	19	5.86
Delhi	1998	70	61	9	12.86
Goa, Daman and DIU	1999	40	38	02	5.00
Gujarat	1998	182	178	04	2.20
Haryana	2000	90	86	04	4.44
Himachal Pradesh	1998	68	62	06	8.82
Jammu & Kashmir	1996	87	85	02	2.30
Karnataka	1999	224	218	06	2.68
Kerala	1996	140	127	13	9.29
Madhya Pradesh	1998	320	294	26	8.13
Maharashtra	1999	288	276	12	4.17
Manipur	2000	60	59	01	1.67

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH PANCHAYATI.....



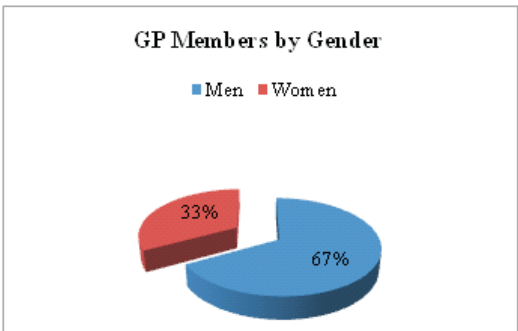
Meghalaya	1998	60	57	03	5.00
Mizoram	1998	40	40	00	00.00
Nagaland	1998	60	60	00	00.00
Orissa	2000	147	134	13	8.84
Pondicherry	1996	30	29	01	3.33
Punjab	1997	117	110	7	5.98
Rajasthan	1998	200	186	14	7.00
Sikkim	1999	32	31	01	3.13
Tamilnadu	1996	234	225	09	3.85
Tripura	1998	60	58	02	3.33
Uttar Pradesh	1996	424	404	20	4.72
West Bengal	1996	294	274	20	6.80

Source: Election Commission in India. (www.eci.gov.in)

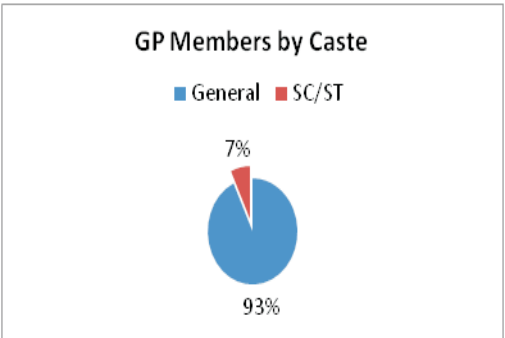
Women's political representation at the state level as the gauged by their membership in state legislatures is abysmally low. The latest data from the states show that Delhi (12.86 per cent) has the highest proportion of women members following by Andhra Pradesh (9.52 per cent) and Kerala (9.29 per cent). Other States will relatively high proportion of women in the State Assemblies including Orissa (8.84 per cent), Himachal Pradesh (8.82 per cent) and Madhya Pradesh (8.13 per cent). It is clear from the data that women's participation in the state legislatures is even lower than their participation in the parliament and the reasons for the variation needs to be studied. In this context the 85th Amendment Bill seeking one-third reservation for women in the parliamentary and legislative seats becomes extremely important possible alternative.

WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

Rural India has a total of 2,25,000 Gram Panchayats with a membership of 22,50,000 elected representatives. The women constitute 7,50,000 elected members, which is one-third of the total representatives. There are 1,50,000 scheduled caste and scheduled tribe members of which 50,000 are women. Out of the total 2,25,000 chairpersons, again one third of them are women.

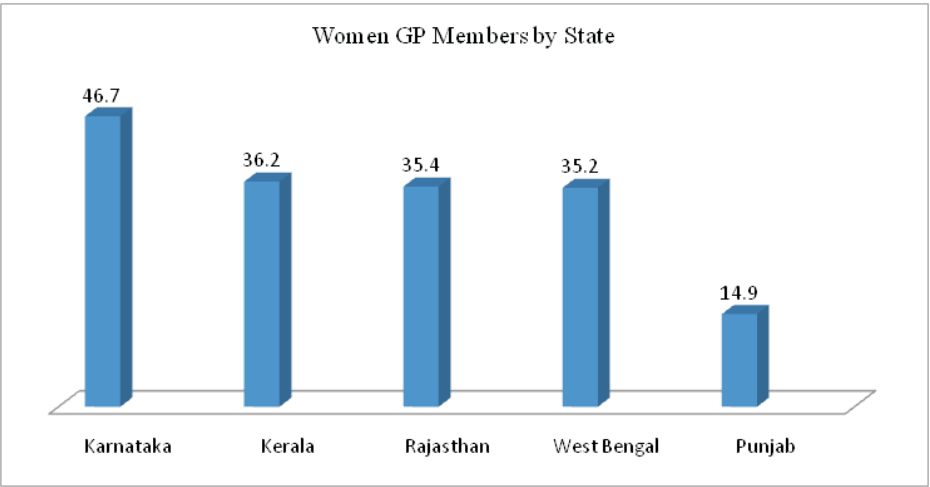


Source: DWCD,GOI(1995)



Source: DWCD,GOI(1995)

Women political representation varies widely across states. Despite most states having at least 33 per cent women as a direct consequence of reservation, some states have even exceeded the 33 per cent quota. These include the states of Karnataka (46.7per cent), Kerala (36.2 per cent), Rajasthan (35.4 per cent) and West Bengal (35.2 per cent). Karnataka, the state with the highest proportion of women elected representatives in 1993 had 5,641GPs with 80,627 members of which 37,689 were women constituting 46.74 per cent of the total membership. Kerala follows closely, with 990 GPs and 10,700 members, of which 3,878 were women (36.2 per cent). On the other side of the spectrum, are states like Punjab where only 14.9 per cent of the GP membership is women, which is less than half that is mandated in the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.



Source: DWCD,GOI(1995)

There are some areas has been identified and presented as the disadvantages faced by women leading to their level of political participation: Access to Resources and information; Awareness; Control over Resources and Information; Personal/ Familial Support; Social-Economic Factors; Organizational Infrastructure; Cultural Barriers and Law and Politics. (IWRAW)

Presently, in India rural local government comprise 2,33,606 village panchayats, 6094 intermediate panchayats, and 543 district panchayats, making a total of 2,40,243 at all the three levels. Total numbers of elected representatives of panchayats at various level are more than 28 lakh, of these nearly 37 per cent are women, 19 per cent belongs to SCs and STs.

Table 3: Leadership Positions in Rural Local Bodies

Panchayat Lvevl	Number	Elected Representatives	Women	SC	ST
1	2	3	4	5	6
District Panchayats	543	111,93	36	17	11
Intermediate Panchayats	6,094	1,13,684	37	21	7
Village Panchayats	2,33,606	18,50,334	37	19	12

Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2010

WOMEN AND PANCHAYATS IN WEST BENGAL

One of the most significant social changes that has been occurred and still being brought about by this pattern of decentralization has been the empowerment of women. West Bengal has had a history of substantial representation of women in panchayats will before the 73rd and 74th Amendment was passed by Parliament; in fact, one-third of panchayat members have been women throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, women have been relatively well represented not only Gram Panchayat level, even at the higher tiers of district government such as the Zilla Parishads. The most resent panchayat elections in 2008 have created even more gender balance of the active policy of the ruling party and its partners in terms of fielding more women candidates, and now the Sabhadhipatis of several districts are women.

The participation of women in panchayats tends to have dynamic effects on the social and political empowerment of women in general, and also has been seen to have positive effect on the general functioning and responsiveness of panchayats to people's needs. Not only it been found that schemes tend to be design with more relevance for local conditions and requirements of all the population, but active women's participation also improve the local enforcement of the requirement of people, especially in terms

of Fair Price Shops that provides goods as specified and at prices that are specified. Several monitoring problems, which have been noticed in schemes such as special meals for girl's students or nutrition programmes for pregnant and lactating mothers or public health campaign, can also be reduced with more active participation and control of women panchayat members over the actual implementation. In terms of employment schemes, panchayats operating with a gender-sensitive focus can encourage greater participation of women works by reducing certain types of inflexibility, such as in the timing of work during the day, the patriarchal attitudes of supervision, etc.

More significantly, the greater presence and participation of women in public life has powerful effects on the situation of women in local society generally. There are numerous examples of how local women leaders have emerged through this process, transforming their own lives and those of the society around them, and altering both social attitudes towards women and the aspirations of women and young girls. The significant increase in the population of girls in education, the better performance of girls in schools, and the strong motivation for schooling even among girls in low income or socially deprived groups; can be at least partly attributed to the influence of women panchayat members in raising consciousness and gender awareness in the local communities.

LEVEL OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN WEST BENGAL:

In a study done in four districts in West Bengal on 50 GP women members and their participation, 28(56 per cent) claimed that they had a high level of participation in Panchayat meetings (Bannerjee, 1995). The responses of 14 members (28 per cent) indicated very low levels of involvement. Those women with high involvement regularly took notes and recorded meeting minutes while the others displayed a lack of confidence in keeping written 22 women felt that they participated equally with men and 19 women lacked confidence in expressing their opinions during the meetings. At the higher levels governance, at the Zilla and Mandal panchayats women were different in their performance and hardly opportunities where men and women can work together. Their working together may lead to awkwardness for both, particularly for women. (IWRAW, 2011)

A study carried out in the four districts in West Bengal on 50 Gram Panchayat women members asked women to describe their contribution to community development (Banarjee, R 1995). Most of women (60 per cent or 30 women) claimed to have played an active role in maintenance of roads, tube well construction, maintenance of school buildings, drainage system and water supply. Some of them had tried sincerely to work towards women's empowerment by taking initiative in providing loans to rural women, protesting against injustice like divorce, child marriage and molestation and helping villagers in general. The remaining 40 per cent were not involved and the reasons given were that male resistance prevented their active participation, not allow them to work in the Gram Panchayats. This implies that in the absence of such resistance women who were not active would have been equally able to contribute towards the overall development of their communities.

WOMEN ATTENDANCE IN GRAM SANSADS MEETING:

Decentralized governance cannot be running effectively without the reasonable participation of women. Keeping in mind of that view the decision maker of Indian political system introduced the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act and ensured women participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. In West Bengal under the left-front government were introduced two grassroots institutions Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad. The people's are directly participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the various schemes or projects through the Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad in West Bengal. The Left Front Government has made various acts for this purpose in the state legislature. The Gram Sansad meeting has conducted regularly but the participation of the people's in general and women in particular has not satisfactory. (Table-4)

Table-4: District-wise Attendance of Gram Sansad Meeting in November, 2002

District	Gram Panchayat	Gram Sansad	Average Voters of Gram Sansad	Average Attendance	Percentage	Average Attendance of Women	Percentage
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Coochbehar	128	1701	749	143	19	17	2
Jalpaiguri	146	2095	744	141	19	18	2
Darjeeling(Hill Area)	112	1041	386	49	13	3	1
Siliguri MP	22	349	823	-	12	-	2
Uttar Dinajpur	99	1470	740	75	10	13	2
Dakshin Dinajpur	65	925	741	63	9	14	2
Malda	147	2021	738	68	9	6	1
Murshidabad	255	3614	784	-	6	-	-
Nadia	187	2639	809	79	10	14	2
North 24-Pargana	200	2923	763	55	7	17	2
South 24-Pargana	312	4324	765	94	12	13	2
Howrah	157	2218	803	46	6	9	1
Hooghly	210	3001	801	91	11	16	2
Purba Medinipur	223	2970	804	97	12	30	4
Paschim Medinipur	290	3449	787	140	18	20	3
Bankura	190	2488	750	30	4	7	1
Purulia	170	1925	711	-	11	-	1
Burdwan	277	3833	817	92	11	17	2
Birbhum	167	2108	764	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	3357	45094	746	82	11	-	2

Source: Panchayati Raj Samachar, Vol.2, No. 1-2, January-February, 2003

In 2002, the attendance in the Gram Sansad meetings has inadequate. The average attendance range in the Gram Sansad meetings has 4 -19 percent only (Table-4). Women attendance in the Gram Sansad meetings has also very low. In 2002, women average attendance range in the Gram Sansad meetings has 1-4 percent only. Its show that women has not get the opportunity to participate in the decision making process in the Panchayati raj Institution after 20 years of 73rd Constitution Amendment act.

CONCLUSION:

Women's participation in Panchayats provided opportunities to woman to participate in the decision making process. Woman's participation proved to be the most effective instrument in bringing about a change in their way of life in terms of economic well-being and adoption of new technology. Women's entry into PRI's both as member as well as heads of Panchayats, has pushed them into the policy-making and policy-implementation process in a very big way. To make women's participation in society and politics a reality, it is emphasized that unless structural changes are brought about, a scientific effort is made to educate women and the power structure existing in rural areas are neutralized, nothing much can be achieved. However, the fact to be realized is that if Panchayati Raj Institutions are to become a vibrant vehicle for the empowerment of rural women, a lot more need to be done. The lack of knowledge and awareness of election and electoral processes among women is a major barrier in participating in elections. Also, the low level of literacy among majority of women prevent them from accessing information about the various political candidates, parties, party manifestos and the debates that precede elections that are critical for making an informed choice of appropriate candidates. Most of the information is in print media and hence a serious handicap for a large majority of women who are illiterates. Awareness development is the most crucial task for injecting an attitude within the women towards participation in the decision making process in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Economic self sufficiency is one of the major pre-condition for political empowerment of women. They are to depend on the husband or male members of the family. They have not taken any decision in the family matters as well as their personal matters. In such a situation, it is not possible for them to take an effective role in political sphere. They should be engaged in some society specific gainful economic activities and the government and banking institutions should come forward to provide those credits for such activities. Women Self-Help Groups be given additional care so that they can have scope and agenda for economic empowerment to incorporate social and political empowerment too. The mail dominated rural social structure is still not reconciled to the women's participation in politics. Media creates a supportive environment for women members by letting society know about their accomplishments, and by influencing public opinion in support of women's reservation

and rights. Hence, the media should be encouraged to come forward for this noble cause. Finally to achieve the political participation can facilitated with the synchronization of different section of the society such as male gentry, religious hands, political leaders who should come forward and shun their interpersonal interest even ego to understand and appreciate that the women an equally as important segment of society as man and without women participation Panchayati Raj Institution will not become a vibrant institution of grassroots democracy.

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