

# The Panchayati Raj Institution and Women Empowerment in India

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**Abstract** —Panchayati Raj Institution is the most important agent of decentralization of power in grassroot democracy of rural India. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment of Indian constitution approved 33% seat reservation for women in this system of decision-making system. This process becomes a major milestone for the of women empowerment through ensuring their existence in this particular decision-making system. In the recent period also, panchayats are contributing significantly in uplifting the status of women in the society. This is a secondary data-based study which tends to understand the role of panchayati raj institutions in the process of women empowerment in India. For this purpose, the study has critically analyzed several journal articles and books.

**Keywords:** Panchayat, Women empowerment, India, Decision-making system, Status.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Panchayati Raj Systems are one of the prime institutions of grass root level governance in Indian democracy. The foundation of this institution was laid by the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of Indian constitution 1992. This three-tier democratic system of governance aims of devolution of powers, funds and responsibilities to the Panchayats for economic, political and social development and prosperity of rural India. These types of institutions are funded by both central and state governments for its long-term sustainability. One of the major and notable contributions of pachayati raj system is the taking care of Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Swaraj in order to make the society self-reliant. Therefore, this institution provides an opportunity to the people to participate in the process of planning and development. In addition, PRIs ensure the identification of locally available resources and address the necessities of all communities through participatory planning and convergence.

Women empowerment is a process of enhancing capacity of a woman in order to fulfill the desired goal for maintaining prosperity and social justice in the society. It is a multidimensional process that comprises political decision making, economic justice, equality in socio-cultural status of a woman. The notion of women empowerment emerged as an offshoot of Feminist movement in western society that aims to promote sense of self-worth, ability to determine their own choice and their right to social development for themselves and others too. This process enables them to make life governing decisions through the different problems in the society. Within the notion of women empowerment; political and economic parameters are considered to be the most crucial that determined and ensured by the level and system of education in a society. In other words, a literate woman will be more aware and conscious of various issues, problems and policies related to political decision making and economic empowerment that governed by the authorities. Empowerment of women is a necessity for very development of a society, since it enhances both the qualitative and quantity and quality of human resources available for the development (Gupta and Yesudian, 2006). Nevertheless, the women empowerment is a comprehensive process which refers to a woman gains greater control over material and intellectual and challenges the ideology of patriarchy and gender-based discrimination against females in all the institution and structure of society (Baltiwala, 1995).

## II. OBJECTIVE

To explore the role of panchayati raj institution in women empowerment in India.

## III. METHODOLOGY

In order to fulfill the objectives of this study, secondary sources of data are taken as base. For this purpose, different article from research journals, books, news articles are considered as the major sources.

#### IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

*Women participation in Panchayati Raj System: A Case Study of Karimganj district of Assam*” by **Suchitra Das** (2014) gives an extensive analysis of participation women in local in PRIs in the particular region. This study reflects a vulnerable picture regarding the proxy representation in different functions of EWRs by their husbands and other male relatives. According to this study out of 577 EWRs 270 were represented as proxy by their husbands, siblings or male family members. For the efficient functioning of PRIs educational qualification of the members matter a lot. Here the educational qualification of Zila Parishad members found to be higher than the presidents and ward members therefore earlier were found to be more efficient in the decision-making system in the governance. achievements of a Woman Elected Representative as a president in Panchayati Raj Institution despite facing the constraints of patriarchal social norms prevalent in professional domain. This case study also showcased the factors that assist that particular representative to achieve her goals for social welfare of common people in that place. These factors are- intention to work with the co-operation of NGOs and agencies, creating self-awareness and training from the odd jobs for their livelihood etc. Additionally, motivation and assistance from their community-based organization were found also crucial which influenced her to perform the duty efficiently. Apart from above drawbacks women elected representatives achieved a lot in the process of making gender equality through participating in the panchayats the regard of their personality development, leadership quality, political awareness enhancement so on. The local body decision-making system provides an opportunity to the elected women representatives to uplift their socio-cultural status not only in their household but in the wider societal context too (Kumar& Jyotsna,2016). As soon as they get involved with the governing system, they find a better opportunity for development of their personality through learning administrative skills, awareness on public policy implementation issues development of leadership traits. Knowledge on the numerous aspects of devolution power through panchayati raj institution is a necessary presupposition for an accountable governance in trajectory of socio-political development in a particular society. Several studies suggest that women representative is able to collect an efficient level of knowledge in these aspects only after becoming a part of the system. Likewise, they gradually spread same information to rest of the marginalized group of people including other women in the society too. From this point of view, political literacy for this group of women is an important criterion for the overall prosperity of the society. Indeed, they can mobilize the marginal people to become aware of socio-economic development that is initiated by government and non-government agents. Because, a large group people in the society do not possess an ample level of knowledge on the reservation of seats for women in local body institutions, rights and responsibilities of such institutions regarding rural development affairs. Through involving with panchayati raj the women representative become awake to the importance of economic independency of women in the society to create a separate social identity just beyond their traditional norms and values in a male dominated societal setting. Compared to male members of the panchayats the females have a better understanding on the socio-economic and cultural obstacles of women empowerment in the society. In other words, they empathetically understand such issues and challenges in everyday life and therefore they can fruitfully apply their knowledge to tackle such problems through a legitimate platform like PRIs which they are associated with. Apart from such scopes the local governances offer a better opportunity to a women member to establish a nexus with the agents of policy implementation like bureaucrats, NGOs and other government authorities’ community development of rural society. This study also tries to understand how far a woman is able improve her skill in decision-making affairs, enhancement in her leadership qualities, learning administrative skills, changes in her awareness level and development of personality after getting elected as a member of local governance. Rational thinking and strong abilities of making decisions in the in major developmental issues are some basic elements of the empowerment of women representatives in the panchayats. Several studies suggest that woman leaders are kept aside or their opinions are not given equal importance by their male counterparts when major decisions are made for the welfare of the people under certain panchayati raj institutions. Further, the decision-making abilities are affected some factors such as their literacy level, government’s initiatives and policies for women empowerment, conduction of awareness camps on legal and constitutional rights for women so forth. Related to present research decision-making abilities of elected women representatives are assessed with help of a few parameters like- ability of taking crucial decisions, potentiality of mobilizing resources like information, ability of systematic utilization funds and utilization of technology for the effective, efficient and accountable governance

#### V. AWARENESS ON ECONOMIC SELF-RELIANCE

Economic independency is one of the prime pre-suppositions for the holistic empowerment of women and combat the gender discrimination in the society. Economic self-reliance also can strengthen the position of women representatives in terms of

decision-making process both within their household along with governance they are involved with. Economic indecency of elected members further positively effects to make governance more transparent, accountable and less corrupted and subsequently it might be an ideal base for holistic development of the society. It is important to be noted that economic self-dependency of elected women representatives can also influence the other poorer and marginalized women in their locality to initiate fresh entrepreneurship through mini, small and medium enterprises like agricultural activities, animal husbandry, and other small startups. There are government policies and schemes to inspire the women and poor people to carry out such activities which provides subsidy-based loan to the needy group of people. Hence the elected representatives have a crucial role to make aware of this group of people so they can avail the benefits of the schemes smoothly. That is to say elected women in the panchayati raj system are considered as one of the prime agents for the process of overall women empowerment and reducing gender gaps in the ground level. This study has made an effort to assess the awareness level of elected women representatives in the regard of economic empowerment of the women and its impact in the process of decision-making system. Economic self-sufficiency of elected women representatives has been assessed on the basis of certain criterions such source of income (not government or private job), ability of management of financial resource both in household and working domain, holding of personal bank account role in financial decision-making grounds.

## VI. POLITICAL AWARENESS

In order to become successful and strong leader in the decision-making system, the women representatives need to be politically aware too. The term 'political awareness' is used here to indicate the extent of knowledge of the Members related to the system of PRIs. In this study the political awareness of the women representatives has been studied through some basic components such as knowledge about the Panchayati Raj Acts in Assam, provision(s) of some Acts, knowledge about PRI, and awareness about 33 per cent women's reservation in Panchayati Raj (ibid., p.441). The data suggests that other than a few elected women representatives do not possess detail knowledge on the features of devolution power in rural decision-making system in India. Mostly they are not well informed about the constitutional provisions of 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of constitutional amendment in India. Further, large number of respondents did not have any idea about the roles and responsibilities of local governments before becoming a part of the larger system. But they got a platform acquire knowledge and awareness on the above aspects when they started to participate actively in decision-making system in terms implementing policies of socio-economic development for the people in their concerned localities. Although they acknowledge that basic information on decentralization of power through panchayati raj institution is one the foremost precondition a woman to contest and become an elected representative in the mentioned institution, but unfortunately their prior political awareness level is found to be awful. However, after a few months after their entry to the panchayat they acquired necessary level knowledge on the power and functions of local body decision-making institutions.

## VII. DECISION-MAKING ABILITIES

Rational thinking and strong abilities of making decisions in the in major developmental issues are some basic elements of the empowerment of women representatives in the panchayats. Several studies suggest that woman leaders are kept aside or their opinions are not given equal importance by their male counterparts when major decisions are made for the welfare of the people under certain panchayati raj institutions. Further, the decision-making abilities are affected by some factors such as their literacy level, government's initiatives and policies for women empowerment, conduction of awareness camps on legal and constitutional rights for women so forth. Related to present research decision-making abilities of elected women representatives are assessed with help of a few parameters like- ability of taking crucial decisions, potentiality of mobilizing resources like information, ability of systematic utilization funds and utilization of technology for the effective, efficient and accountable governance. The problem-solving ability is another important aspect that intrinsically connected with the decision-making skill of elected representatives in the panchayats. Through the assessment of these parameters the decision-making ability of elected women representatives in the panchayats of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh district. The responses on this aspect found to be mixed in nature where one of the women representatives in District panchayat expressed that she is not dependent much on her male counterparts or block members in terms of making important decisions on utilization and management of funds which allocated by the higher authorities for the fulfillment of socio-economic development goals in infrastructure, sanitation, housing, fresh drinking water so on

## VIII. SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTION

There is general perception that status of women Northeastern part including Assam is somewhat better than the pan Indian context. The influence of tribal culture is considered to major factor that significantly impacts this process. Consequently, the

awareness and initiatives for women empowerment in local body political institutions is not so sharp compared to other parts of India. Additionally, in Northern and Southern regions the governments supposed take separate initiatives for the socio-political upliftment of Dalit and backward caste women, since the power centric clash between these groups are so strong within them or they do not wish to mix up with each other socially, culturally or in the political decision-making ground. But in the context of Assam these phenomena are not so subtle and because of what different mode of capacity building initiatives or awareness programs are not adopted by the government agencies, NGOs, UNICEF, media, civil society or the stakeholders of the democracy. But it cannot be assumed that they occupy a better position in their working place too. Because their socio-cultural status does not ensure their strong hold as the representatives in the decision-making with high level of awareness in running a local government system. In this aspect they may have low level of awareness and information while acting as a responsible member in the concerned institution. Their so called better socio-cultural status stands as major hurdle in the capacity building process and therefore far lagging behind in terms accessing information, resource, awareness to mobilize themselves which largely associated with wider definition of women empowerment.

## IX. CONCLUSION

One of the important features of panchayat raj institution is that it has made the provision for reservation for women in panchayat. Through this system of women have entered the politics at grass root level. Women representatives have expressed that reservation of seats in Panchayat Raj Institution may help women in the society to improve them financially, socially and to promote their participation in politics, hence, this provision has to be continued in future too. there are a lot of instances where they socio-political empowerment and awareness level was got better after getting elected in the system. The local body decision-making system provides an opportunity to the elected women representatives to uplift their socio-cultural status not only in their household but in the wider societal context too (Kumar& Jyotsna,2016). As soon as get involved with the governing system, they receive a better opportunity for development of their personality through learning administrative skills, awareness on public policy implementation issues development of leadership traits. Knowledge on the numerous aspects of devolution power through panchayati raj institution is a necessary presupposition for an accountable governance in trajectory of socio-political development in a particular society. Several studies suggest that women representative is able to collect an efficient level of knowledge in these aspects only after becoming a part of the system. Likewise, they gradually spread same information to rest of the marginalized group of people including other women in the society too. From this point of view, political literacy for this group of women is an important criterion for the overall prosperity of the society. Indeed, they can mobilize the marginal people to become aware of socio-economic development that is initiated by government and non-government agents. Because, a large group people in the society do not possess an ample level of knowledge on the reservation of seats for women in local body institutions, rights and responsibilities of such institutions regarding rural development affairs. Through involving with panchayati raj the women representative become awake to the importance of economic independency of women in the society to create a separate social identity just beyond their traditional norms and values in a male dominated societal setting. Compared to male members of the panchayats the females have a better understanding on the socio-economic and cultural obstacles of women empowerment in the society. In other words, they empathetically understand such issues and challenges in everyday life and therefore they can fruitfully apply their knowledge to tackle such problems through a legitimate platform like PRIs which they are associated with. Apart from such scopes the local governances offer a better opportunity to a women member to establish a nexus with the agents of policy implementation like bureaucrats, NGOs and other government authorities' community development of rural society. This study also tries to understand how far a woman is able improve her skill in decision-making affairs, enhancement in her leadership qualities, learning administrative skills, changes in her awareness level and development of personality after getting elected as a member of local governance. This is also going to explore their awareness in the issues economic independency of women in the society for the upliftment of their socio-cultural status.

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