

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN GRAM PANCHAYAT ELECTIONS IN ODISHA: A CASE STUDY OF HINDOL BLOCK IN DHENKANAL DISTRICT

Artatrana Gochhayat

**Assistant Professor of Political Science,
Sree Chaitanya College, Habra, West Bengal, India
E-mail: agnet76@yahoo.com**

ABSTRACT

The present study attempted to learn the extent of the political participation of women in the functioning as well as the electoral process of panchayats and their problems. The study was conducted in March/April immediately after the general panchayat elections in February 2012, using a sample of 125 women respondents from five gram panchayats of Hindol Block in Dhenkanal District of Odisha. The findings revealed that the political participation of women in the functioning and the electoral process of panchayats is not satisfactory. Some do not even know the names of the political parties and they cast their votes by identifying the symbols of the political parties. Most of the women have a great apathy towards politics. A parochial culture, patriarchal society and low level of education are responsible for their backwardness.

INTRODUCTION

A developing democracy like India needs the wider participation of people irrespective of caste, colour, creed and sex. In order to provide this opportunity, the system of democratic decentralization through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) was introduced. As women constitute a sizeable portion of the total population, their participation in grass roots politics is essential to make democratic governance successful. The question of their participation arises because of their long standing neglected social status in male-dominated Indian society.

In Odisha, women constitute a little less than 50% of the state's total population. Their socio-economic status is, however, relatively low and they are discriminated against in all walks of life. For centuries, women have been confined to the home, suppressed and deprived of their right to get fair treatment from the male-dominated society. The development of women has, therefore, been one of the major issues in Odisha.¹

CONCEPT OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Generally, the term "political participation" refers to those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of rulers and directly or indirectly in the formation of public policy. These activities include casting votes, seeking information, holding discussions, attending meetings, staging strikes and demonstrations, communicating with legislators and the like. According to Herbert McClosky, "Participation is the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and the rulers are made accountable to the ruled."² As Noorjahan Baba puts it, "direct and indirect participation of citizens in public affairs is the lifeline of a participatory democracy".³

Subordination of women to men in the home, the work place and in politics is a dominant socio-political reality that has its origin in the past. The relationship between men and women was "grounded on force" and the law of the strongest has been the phenomenon in their relationship. The notion that men are the natural masters of women has continued to hinder the evolution of an egalitarian society where women enjoy equal status.⁴

PAST RESEARCH

The available literature on the political participation of women in PRIs indicates that women including those women who are elected representatives are mere instruments in the hands of their male counterparts. R.Arun (1997)⁷ in a case study of Madhya Pradesh found that in most cases women representatives are housewives, first time entrants into politics and illiterate or educated only up to primary level. G.Palanithuri (1997)⁸ in his case study of Tamil Nadu reported that women were not reported or invited to meetings in the male-headed Gram Panchayat. S.Pai (2001)⁹ in her field notes in Meerut District found that Pradhanis in

Panchayats were illiterate and only able to put their signatures on official papers. S.Panda (1996)¹⁰ in her study of village panchayats in Orissa found that women entered into politics due to the mandatory provision of reservation or pressure from their family members or pressure from their village community. Manikyamba (1990)¹¹ in her study of Andhra Pradesh found that socio-economic background in general and political background in particular are important determinants shaping the nature and level of participation of women in political institutions. Dr. Sing (2004)¹² presents the findings of an empirical study of elected women representatives of the PRIs of Haryana exploring the extent of their empowerment as a result of the implementation of the 73rd Amendment Act. Dr.Bharti (2011)¹³ explains that before the 73rd Amendment came into force, the Government of Orissa had adopted some important provisions such as the reservation of women, SCs and STs in its existing Panchayati Raj Acts. Kaul and Sahni (2009)¹⁴ explore the extent of political participation of women elected representatives in Panchayats and the problems faced by them in two districts of Jammu and Kathua. Patnaik (2005)¹⁵ explores the extent of participation of elected representatives belonging to weaker sections in the functioning of four gram panchayats in Orissa's Dhenkanal district.

However, my study tries to highlight the awareness, interest and involvement of women in the Panchayat administration and election.

OBJECTIVES

The chief objectives of this study were:

- To know how far and to what extent rural women participate in different spheres of activities ranging from decision-making to exercising the right to vote in the gram panchayat
- To explore the awareness, interest, and involvement of women in Gram Panchayat elections
- To know the leadership qualities of women
- To assess the perception of women about the panchayat system in general and their role in particular

- To find out the factors which overtly or covertly tend to promote or prevent women members from performing their roles.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE COVERAGE

The present study is mostly based on empirical methods. Schedules were employed to collect data from the sample respondents. I also conducted personal interviews with the women respondents. Stratified random sampling was applied in order to select the gram panchayats. Data were collected from secondary sources like census reports, government documents, gazetteers, district handbooks and other published literature.

As it is impossible to study the political participation of all the women of Orissa, I selected only one block, i.e., Hindol Block in Dhenkanal District where there are 36 Gram Panchayats (GPs). Out of 36 GPs, 5 GPs i.e. Baunshpokhari, Kantamila, Hatura, Gulehi and Karanda were selected on a random basis. From these 5 GPs, I selected 125 sample respondents, 25 sample respondents from each GP. Here, a random sampling method was adopted for the selection of sample respondents.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND POLICIES FOR WOMEN

The following plans and constitutional provisions have been provided to women in order to make them equal with their male counterparts. The *Preamble of Indian Constitution* recognizes the principles of social, economic and political justice to all its citizens and also equality of status and of opportunity and to promote among them all. *The Fundamental Rights* as guaranteed by the Constitution (Part III, Articles 12-35) tries to remove the inequalities which Indian women have suffered. Some guidelines are also given in the *Directive Principles of State Policy (Part-IV, Articles. 36-51)* which are non-justiciable. *Article 51(e) (Fundamental Duties, Part IVA 42nd Amendment Act, 1976)* directs the state to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992) facilitate women's participation in

the Panchayat Raj system. The 84th and 85th Amendment to the Constitution will also expect one-third of the total number of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies to be reserved for women including those from the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. All the Five Year Plans have given importance to the development of women, with a major objective of raising their economic and social status. Despite all such constitutional provisions and plans, there has been no satisfactory development in their social status.

RURAL LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN ODISHA AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Odisha is one of the pioneering states in the field of Panchayati Raj initiatives in India. Soon after independence, the Government of Odisha enacted the *Orissa Gram Panchayat Act in 1948*. After that, the *Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act, 1959* was enacted and executed on 26th January 1961 in Odisha. When Biju Patnaik became Chief Minister during the sixties, he made concrete efforts to realize the Panchayati Raj system. During his second term as Chief Minister (1990-95) and under his dynamic leadership, Odisha became the first in India to implement the sound provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 in advance to give opportunities to women by making reservations of one-third seats for them and for women belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. For the first time in the history of independent India, women were

given 30% reservation in the three-tier PRIs in Odisha prior to the implementation of 73rd Amendment Act.

At present, Odisha has a three-tier system of rural local self-government, the first tier being at the village level i.e. Gram Panchayat, the second tier at the Block level i.e. Panchayat Samiti and the third at the district level i.e. Zilla Parishad and 50% of seats for women have been reserved in all the tiers. The present Panchayati Raj structure of Odisha includes 30 Zilla Parishads with 854 elected Zilla Parishad members, 314 Panchayat Samitis with 6,235 elected Panchayat Samiti members, 6,236 Gram Panchayats including 6,236 elected Sarpanches and 87,551 elected Ward Members out of which 46,643 Women Ward Members constitute the rural local governance system. Thus, in Odisha now there is a total of 100,876 elected representatives in the three-tier rural local self governance system out of which 50% women are elected members, underlining the importance of women participation in the three-tier rural local self governance system.¹⁶

EMPIRICAL STUDY

In order to know the electoral participation of women in Gram Panchayat elections, I collected the necessary information from the women through schedules. The first question asked was "Did you participate in the electoral process of the last Panchayat election?" The table given below shows the response pattern.

Participation of Women in Panchayat Election Table No.1

Question	(N=125)			
	Yes	No	Yes%	No%
Did you participate in the electoral process of the last Panchayat election?	105	20	84%	16%

Source: Personal Communication/Survey

Though Gram Panchayats are created as grass root democratic institutions and election to these bodies is the first political experience for the women, there is still not 100% electoral participation of women. The above micro study, found that only 84% of women participated in the Panchayat election.

But interestingly, when they were asked which party they voted for, most of their responses

show that they do not know about different political parties. Rather they know only the symbol for which they voted and they cast their vote not according to their own judgment and conscience but according to the dictates of the local leaders.

The second question asked about the mode of electoral participation of the respondents who participated in the last panchayat election.

Table No.2
Mode of Electoral Participation

(N=80)

Sl. No.	Patten of Participation	No. saying 'yes'	Percentage (%)
1	As a Voter	80	100
2	As a Member of Political party	25	31.25
3	As a supporter of political party	30	37.5
4	As a campaigner	20	25
5	As a Candidate	10	12.5
6	Any other	-	-

Source: Personal Communication/Survey

The above table shows that though the women constitute half of the total population of the country, some of them are very ignorant about the electoral system. They are mere instruments in the hands of the male leaders and they know only about voting. Though few of them hold political posts, they are suppressed and guided by the male leaders. The above micro study found that 100% of the total women respondents were voters but very

few of them are members of political parties, supporters of political parties, campaigners of a political party or party candidates.

Political awareness is the stepping-stone of political participation. Awareness creates interest and interest creates involvement so the study investigated the extent to which the women were aware of the electoral process.

Awareness of Women

Table No.3

(N=125)

Sl. No	Questions	Respondents saying 'yes'	Percentage (%)
1	Do you know that the voting has been reduced from 21 years to 18 years?	30	24%
2	Do you know that elections are conducted in every five years?	80	64%
3	Do you know that a citizen who is 18 years of age can vote in the election?	60	48%
4	Do you know that when you are 25 years of age you can contest in the election?	40	32%
5	Do you know about the provisions of political rights?	20	16%
6	Do you know that there is a Gram Panchayat in your locality?	125	100%
7	What is the name of your Sarpancha?	90	72%
8	Do you know that there is a Block Development Officer who looks after the Development of your Gram Panchayat?	35	28%
9	Do you know that seats are reserved for women in Gram Panchayat,	40	32%

	Panchayat Samitis, and Assemblies & Parliament?		
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Source: Personal Communication/Survey

The above table, reveals that women have very poor awareness regarding the electoral process of the Gram Panchayats.

The present study investigated the interaction between the women and the Gram Panchayats. The following table shows the pattern of their interaction.

Pattern of Interaction between women and Gram Panchayat

Table No.4

Sl.No.	Questions	(N=125)		
		Regularly (%)	Sometimes (%)	Never (%)
1.	Have you ever put forth your demands before the Gram Panchayat?	25 (20%)	35 (28%)	65 (52%)
2.	Do the Gram Panchayat members meet you?	15 (12%)	20 (16%)	90 (72%)
3.	Do you attend the meetings of Gram Sabha?	05 (4%)	10 (8%)	110 (88%)
4.	Do you attend the meetings of Palli Sabha?	20 (16%)	25 (20%)	80 (64%)
5.	Do you think that yours demands are always fulfilled by the Gram Panchayat?	20 (16%)	30 (24%)	75 (60%)

(Source: Personal Communication/Survey)

The above table shows that the women are less satisfied with the performance of the Gram Panchayat and so far as their participation in gram sabha or palli sabha is concerned, it is very low.

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

An analysis of all the data collected from the respondents in this survey makes it evident that some of the women rarely participate in the electoral process or in the affairs of the Panchayats.

This study shows that women have very little awareness about the electoral process and they have no idea about their rights, liberties and their own position in society.

During the survey it emerged that some of them don't know about the different political parties functioning in our country; they only know the symbols. In other words, they are mere instruments in the hands of the political parties. As their responses show, by political participation they simple understand casting

votes. Though they are regarded as voters, they don't know the value of votes. Although most of them hold political posts, they are suppressed and guided by the male leaders.

They have very little sense about provisions like voting age, age of a person to contest in an election, the period of elections, the provision of fundamental rights, the reservation of seats for women in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, Assemblies and Parliament etc.

Their interaction with the gram panchayat is minimal and they don't put their demands before the Gram Panchayat about the facilities and privileges meant for them. This is because of their lack of consciousness and low levels of education. So far as the performance of the Gram Panchayat is concerned they are least satisfied with that.

From the above analysis, it is obvious that a number of reasons are responsible for their apathy and indifference to political

participation - illiteracy, poverty, traditional patterns of society, narrow attitudes of family members and to some extent, the irresponsible attitude of the Gram Panchayat. As a result, the women in this block, not only politically, but also socially, economically, culturally and educationally are very backward.

OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

- Caste, class and gender hierarchies
- Apathy of women towards politics
- Low level of education and socio-cultural norms
- Conservative attitude of family members and the system of patriarchy
- Poverty and lack of financial control

CHANGE OF MINDSET

Though a large number of women are backward in all respects, there is some positive sign that has come out from this survey. Some women are very aware and actively participate in the affairs of the Panchayat and are interested in contesting in the election in order to exercise power. A great change has taken place in the mindset of women as well as of their family members. This is the result of increasing development of mass media (like radio, newspaper, T.V. etc), communication systems, the role of political parties and perhaps the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts brought a sea change in the outlook of men towards women. Thus the political participation of women in the affairs of the Panchayat is gradually developing.

CONCLUSION

The participation of women in the affairs of the Panchayat administration is not satisfactory. The awareness, interest and involvement of women in Gram Panchayat elections is still in the darkness of traditional culture.

Mere inclusion of political reforms, constitutional provisions and rights is not enough; the issue is critical, and requires careful consideration by women and of course by men. It is only through a new way of thinking, a broad perspective of analysis, an objective approach, a rational stream of thoughts irrespective of gender that we can achieve some degree of change. Women have to recognize, collectively and critically, the forces that limit them and to work collectively

and continuously to change the unequal power structure. The family, community and state should together create a situation wherein elected women representatives act effectively in PRIS.

Above all, the Gram Panchayats should work more actively and vigorously for the development of women in order to realize the benefits of rights, equality and justice as enshrined in the preamble of the Indian Constitution.

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Author: kkp
Keywords:
Comments:
Creation Date: 20/07/2012 19:51:00
Change Number: 16
Last Saved On: 05/01/2014 12:04:00
Last Saved By: Janet Wilson
Total Editing Time: 3,881 Minutes
Last Printed On: 05/01/2014 12:05:00
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 7
Number of Words: 3,218 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 18,349 (approx.)