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Women Participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Case Study of Barak Valley

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Abstract

In India, Panchayati Raj Institutions assume great importance from the point of view of democratization in the political system. Article 40 of the Indian constitution lays down that the state shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government. The architects of Panchayati Raj Institutions envisaged that not only men but also women should participate in the village panchayat. The 73rd and 74th amendment act is an important event in the Indian history in which 33 percent reservation has been given to women at the Panchayat and Municipal level. The reservation for women in panchayats have provided a possibility for demolishing traditional gender, caste and religious biasness but it is a long and difficult process for bringing about social change. The question remains: whether the constitutional amendment will be able to contribute to women's empowerment or will the existing patriarchal structures continue to dominate in the society. This paper is an attempt to understand the case of elected women in Panchayat level representation and how far these types of representation lead the way to their empowerment.

Keywords: *Women, Participation, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)*

1. Introduction: In a country like India, Panchayati Raj institutions assume great importance from the point of view of democratization in the political system. As Gandhi often pointed out, India lives in villages and unless village life can be revitalized the nation as a whole can hardly come alive. After independence, Article 40 of the Indian constitution enshrines one of the directive principles of state policy, which lays down that 'the state shall take steps to organize village Panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.' The architects of Panchayati Raj Institution envisaged that not only men but also women should participate in the village Panchayat. In this race, women have been failed to involve actively in politics due to the existing social structure in the Indian society. As a result, they did not achieve an equal status in the society compared to their male counterparts.

In order to improve the structure of Panchayati Raj institutions, Balwantrai Mehta Committee (1952); Ashok Mehta committee (1977); CAARD Commission (1985); Sarkaria Commission (1988); Sixty Fourth Amendment Bill were formed and finally 73rd and 74th amendment was enacted in 1992. The 73rd and 74th amendment acts are an important event in the Indian history in which 33 per cent reservation has been given to Indian women at the Panchayat and Municipal level. The reservation for women in Panchayat have provided a possibility for demolishing traditional gender, caste and religious biasness but it is a long and

difficult process for bringing about social change. The question remains: whether the constitutional amendment will be able to contribute to women's empowerment or will the existing patriarchal structures continue to dominate in the society. This paper is an attempt to understand the participation of elected women and their role in panchayats and how far their representation helps in the way to their empowerment with special reference to Barak valley of Assam.

2. Background of Panchayati Raj Institutions

In spite of the long history of grassroots level political participation and its importance in India whatever be the institutional mechanism that was followed the first draft of India's Constitution did not include a provision for panchayats. Later a provision was included in Part IV of Art 40 of the Constitution (in the Directive Principles of State Policy). By this constitutional provision, India may not give an importance to the village Panchayat and it was used in some of the Indian states as an experiment. In the early 1950s, the Planning Commission introduced the Community Development (CD) programmes. The panchayats were supposed to help bureaucracy in implementing these programmes and schemes of the central and state governments. A committee was appointed in 1957 to examine the practicality of CD programmes under the chairmanship of Balwantrai Mehta, who was a Member of Parliament. The committee reported that the CD programmes failed to involve the local community participation. On the basis of that, the committee also recommended a framework for the decentralization. Rajasthan was the first state in India to implement the framework suggested by Balwantrai Mehta Committee. In 1977 the Ashok Mehta Committee was appointed to assess the working of the PRIs and to provide suggestions to strengthen them. The committee opined that there were second-generation panchayats in few states where the panchayats emerged as political institutions. Even though the Constitution (64th Amendment) bill was introduced in 1989 in the Parliament, it was defeated in the Rajya Sabha. Then the 73rd Amendment act was enacted in 1992 and it came into force from April 24, 1993. The present PRIs came in its newer allocation is the consequence of the 73rd Amendment. The essential prerequisites of the self-governance of PRIs are: (a) clearly demarcated constituencies; (b) clear power and authority on one hand and responsibilities on the other; (c) availability of enough human and financial resources to manage and realize the planned goals; and (d) functional autonomy within the structure of the third-tier of governance. Till the introduction of this constitutional amendment, there were two levels of Panchayat structures. The 73rd Amendment Act has made panchayats instruments of local-government with potentials pace for women and marginalized groups in the federal setup. Some of the major features of this act are: (i) A three-tiers system at village, block/mandal/ and district levels (ii) Direct election to all posts at all levels (iii) Reservation on a rotational basis for the SCs and STs in proportion to their population (iv) Reservation of not less than one-third of the seats and offices for women (v) Five-year term (vi) Devolution of powers and responsibilities by the state in preparation and implementation of schemes relating to the subjects listed in the Eleventh Schedule of the Act (vii) Setting up a State Finance Commission after every five years to review the financial position of these institutions (viii) Setting up a State Election Commission for holding Panchayat elections. According to this act, panchayats should be the institutions of self-governance. If panchayats have to function as institutions of self-governance at the grass-root level they have to: fulfill three basic conditions, namely, (a) institutional existence in the sense the decisions are taken by the people's representatives (b) institutional capacity in the form of empowering in situations to make their rules independently and (c) financial viability in terms of sufficiently empowering panchayats in raising resources to meet their responsibilities. In other words, the panchayats should enjoy functional, administrative and financial autonomy. There is an opinion that the

affirmative action for these groups in local governance has resulted in social identities and political awareness among them and created an urge to become part of mainstream political, economic and social life. With initial clashes between 'higher' castes and 'lower' castes, there are indications of social cohesion at local levels. The political space given to marginalized section has, to some extent, dealt with a blow to the asymmetrical social structure at the local level and given greater space for their participation and involvement in decision-making. With the introduction of the 73rd Amendment Act and the process of elections initiated in 1996 all over the country, the local bodies were given powers, authority and functions to perform the role of decentralized governance at the grass root level. The 73rd Amendment Act has perceptually widened the democratic base providing the potential for local-level planning and implementation of development programmes. The new PRIs have the potential to act as the democratic institutions of local self-governance. These potentialities include the participative self-governance, ensuring political empowerment to the poor, marginalized and the oppressed - scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women - at the grass-root level. Sheer numbers involved in this process of institutionalization are mind-boggling as compared to the number of elected representatives in the Parliament and state legislatures. The two Houses of Parliament together have 790 members (Lok Sabha: 545; Rajya Sabha: 245), 29 state assemblies and two union territories with assemblies have 4,173 members together. While under the new Panchayat system there are around 532 district panchayats, 5912 block/tehsil/mandal panchayats and 2,31,630 gram panchayats (as a part of 73rd Amendment) and 95 city corporations, 1,436 town municipalities and 2,055 nagar panchayats with elected representatives numbering about 30,00,000 (as per the 74th Amendment Act). Of these, about 10, 00,000 are women and 6, 60,000 belong to scheduled castes/scheduled tribes. The 73rd Amendment has Act brought to the fore vital issues wherein the PRIs could function as autonomous entities. Some basic definitions and working of this system as per Article 243 are presented below: 'Gram sabha' means a body consisting of persons registered in electoral rolls relating to a village comprised with the area of a Panchayat at the village level; 'Panchayat' means an institution (by whatever name called) of self- government constituted under Article 243B, for the rural areas; Constitution of Panchayat (Article 243B): There shall be constituted in every state, panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels in accordance with the provisions of this part. Powers, authority and responsibilities of panchayats (243G):Subject to the provision of this Constitution, the legislature of a state may by law, endow the Panchayat with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to functions as institutions of self-government and such law may contain provisions for devolution of powers and responsibilities upon panchayats at the appropriate level, subject to such conditions as may be specified there in, with respect to (a) the preparation of plan for economic development and social justice (b) the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice as may be entrusted to them including those in relation to the matters listed in the eleventh schedule.

3. Evolution of Panchayati Raj System in Assam

The Rural Panchayat Act was enacted in 1948 which introduced two tiers of Panchayat in Assam- Primary Panchayat at village level and Rural Panchayat at Mouza level. In 1959, Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1959 was passed and three-tier system was introduced. These were Gaon Panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat and Mohokuma Parishad. Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1972 again introduced a two-tier system namely, Gaon Panchayat and Mohokuma Parishad. Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986 was enacted in 1986 and under this act again a three-tier system was introduced- Gaon panchayat, Anchalik Panchayat & Mohokuma Parishad.

New Panchayati Raj act was passed by the Assam assembly in 1994 following the 73rd constitutional amendment act. But this system generally came into existence in Assam after the completion of the Panchayat election in 2001-2002. This system has established a three-tier structures of local-self government- Gaon Panchayat at the village level, Anchalik Panchayat at the block level and the Zilla Parishad at the district level. In addition, there is Gaon Sabha at the grass-root level composed of all the voter citizens of a village within the area of a Gaon Panchayat. This marks an important benchmark in democratic decentralization and empowerment of weaker sections of the society.

4. Profile of Barak valley:

The Barak Valley covers an area of 6222 sq. km. and is administratively divided into 27 Blocks, 321 Gaon Panchayats and 1050 Villages. It consist of three districts namely Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The total population of this valley is around 361, 2581 (2011 Census Report) in which 184, 6104 are male and 17, 66477 are female. The literacy rate of this valley is around 78.00 per cent. The valley lies between longitude of 92°15' and 93°15' East and latitude of 24°08' and 25°08' North and geographically isolated not only from mainstream of India but also from the rest of the state of Assam owing to difficult topography of the adjoining areas. It is surrounded by other states of India viz., Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur and a long vulnerable international border with Bangladesh. The topography of the valley is heterogeneous having hills, low lands and plain areas. The Barak-Surma-Kusiara river system passes through this valley. It is geographically the part of what was known as Surma Valley in pre-partition days consisting of the old districts of Sylhet (now included in Bangladesh) and Cachar. Of the Surma Valley, only Cachar and a part of Karimganj sub-division of Sylhet district forms the present Barak Valley deriving its name from the main river, Barak. The valley is covered with a network of sluggish streams and saucer-like depressions. Numerous hillocks stand all over the valley. The valley is also covered by hill ranges from north, east and south. It has vast tracts of forest land in its southern part. The hilly terrain in the valley is used for tea plantation and the principal crops produced in the plain areas are rice, jute, sugarcane, potato, rape seed, mustard seed etc. About 90 percent of the gross cropped area is used for cultivation of rice and tea plantation.

The geographical features analysed above endow the valley a distinct regional identity leading to the justification of drawing up special programmes within the integrated development plans for Assam and North East India. The valley's unique geographically location makes it worthy of a nodal point in developing inter-state economic links and cooperation between Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur. The valley is also likely to play an important role in Indo-Bangladesh economic cooperation if economic ties are developed between the two countries.

5. Women in Panchayati Raj and a case study of Barak valley:

As may be expected, the experience of women in panchayati Raj has been varied. Many are surrogates for husbands and fathers who could not contest because of the reservation. Some were put in place by the wealthy and powerful, for their malleability—a kind of puppet to serve the vested interest while appearing to be an elected representative. It has led to many problems that have been extensively discussed in the literature and form the basis for an excellent film, sponsored by UNICEF, called *Shansodhan*.

Yet, it must not be forgotten that this experiment in local self-government is being undertaken in a society that is predominantly illiterate. Many of the people elected, especially those in the reserved categories are very poor. In attending meetings of the GP, they often have to give up a day's wages. To use terms popularized by Amartya Sen, the entitlements of

the actors in this great drama of democracy are way below what they should be. As a result, their capabilities to play these roles are low as these are in uncharted territory.

Therefore, here we are presenting the field level experiences of women in Panchayati Raj system in Barak Valley. To understand the participation of women and their role in Panchayati Raj Institutions, we have interviewed six women representative in three districts of this valley (two from each district). The findings of these six case studies are discussed below.

5.1 Case 1

Chargola Gaon Panchayat (G.P) is located in Karimganj district of Barak valley. It is 5.00 km away from the main road. Around 3000 population are come under the jurisdiction of this Gaon Panchayat. There are 530 houses and 430 families. The GP is divided into 10 wards. As per new Panchayati Raj Act of Assam-1994, three seats including president post are reserved for women. In the recent GP election, Smt. Maya Rani Baroi (BJP candidates) is elected as a president of Chorgola G.P. because the post of GP President is reserved for an SC (Schedule Caste) woman. She passed nine standards. Since she is an elected president, all ten members of this G.P must obey her decisions. However, 6 members including two female members were found not to satisfy of the activities of the president. They complained that president is irregular in the Panchayat and Gaon Sabha meetings. Her husband was found to attend in meetings. All of the decisions of the Gaon Panchayat were taken to her home. As a result, they (six members) asked her either to resign or they would take no confidence motion. Finally, president of the Chorgola G.P call for a special meeting and raised her problem of irregularity of the Panchayat meetings. She said that her family members are not willing to go outside. Besides, shamefulness, family constraint as well as traditional outlook were found to be the cause for irregularity.

Now question is that does a mere reservation for women bring any social change? Reservation has brought to prominence a person who would never have attained such a position under "normal" conditions. Does the policy of reservation give a chance to the male members to exploit this opportunity? If so, under what conditions will they play a positive role, as in this case?

5.2 Case 2

In recent Panchayat term, Gaon Panchayat members (women) of the Putni Gaon Panchayat (Located at Karimganj district) were found to show their level of dissatisfaction against the government officials. They were found to say that Gaon Panchayat secretary (Government official) never noticed their issues rose in the Gaon Panchayat meetings. Though the current President of this Gaon Panchayat is a woman (Sita Devi Hazam), all of the decisions of the Gaon Panchayat were found to take on the advice of the her husband (erstwhile president of Putni G.P) and vice-president (male). In the Gaon Panchayat and Gaon Sabha meetings, male word members were found to be a kingmaker of all decisions. It is worth mentioning that Sita Devi Hazam was found illiterates.

The findings of this study shows that Ms Sita Devi Hazam is clearly a "dummy" candidate and she contested in the election because her husband could not contest due to the reservation of women. It also shows that in a traditional society, it is difficult for men to accept women in positions of authority.

5.3 Case 3

Rangahuti Gaon Panchayat is located at Hailakandi district, about 4 Km away from the district HQ. The official head quarter (block office) of this Gaon Panchayat is Hailakandi which is also same distance from this village. The population of this GP is around 10,000. An election for the Gaon Panchayat was held in 2008. The post of President was reserved for woman and Asma Begum Barbhuiya became the President. Other three women elected

members were also found in the GP through the policy of reservation. Asma Begam and other two words women members were found to pass class tenth and seven standards respectively. The rest of one word member who was found to pass class 12th. During the period of field study, it was found that women members were found irregular in the Panchayat meetings. They were found to send their family members like husband, brother or causin in the Panchayat meetings. It was also found that their family members did not have any chance to participate in the important decisions of Gaon Panchayat as they are not representatives of Gaon Panchayat. As a result, it can be said that women are not active in the panchayat. Regarding the causes of non-participation, it was found that women members have no salary by which they would give their service. Besides, all the financial power is concentrated in the pocket of president. So, the seats of ward member are nothing but like a designation only. Thus, it is cleared that women members are not willing to involve in voluntary works as politics.

5.4 Case 4

In case of this study, Miss. Priya Agrawari who was found to be continued her second term as a member of Zilla Parishad in the Hailakandi district. She was found to enthusiastic to contest the election to the legislative assembly of Assam. She is an unmarried women belongs to the tea garden community and her native village is Lalamukh which is around 30 km away from the district head quarter i.e. Hailakandi. She did her primary education from that school which is away from 7 km to her home. During that period, tea garden authority did not like the labouror to go to the schools. But she is exception and passed 12th class. Being a literate woman, she would like to do something for the women in her village and started a Mahila Mandal. Growing to strength of 100 members this Mandal was successful in accessing government loans meant for poor women—like sewing machines under TRYSEM. This was the beginning step to start her political career. When the policy of reservation enacted in the PRIs, the village became her base and she was elected to be a president of the Gaon Panchayat. She completed her five-year term and learnt a great deal about the functioning of local government in the process. She established good links with politicians from the local area. In 2008, she contested as a party candidate (congress party) for the seats (reserved for women) of Zilla Parishad and elected. Thus, Miss. Agrawari is an example of the new politician emerging from the PRI system in Assam. Women like her would have found it impossible to make a mark in the system without the reservations. Yet, she argues that this is only a first step. From this case study, it is cleared that without educational qualifications, women will find it difficult to work the system.

Miss. Agrawari showed the system of reservations for women and for depressed sections of society working at its best. But how many such cases are there? Question is that under what conditions such reservations will lead to positive results, especially where women are concerned? How will establish politicians react to the emergence of politicians like Miss. Agrawari? We do not know.

5.5 Case 5

Smt. Basonti Robidas, an SC woman was found to be a president of Arkhatipur Gaon Panchayat (located at Silchar district of Assam). She was found to be illiterate. Her husband is an active party member of Indian National Congress. With the help of party, she became a president of this G.P. Although she was found to be a president but all of her official work were found to maintain her husband. It was also found that she did not like to wish to meet outsiders without the permission of her husband. However, her husband was found to say that she used to busy in domestic works i.e., child care and others. Moreover, her husband was found to do all of the Panchayat related duties. From this case study, it is cleared that traditional outlook, gender biasness are working simultaneously.

In this case study some important questions are to be noted. Is there any gender discrimination in the local level? Are women representatives getting satisfaction to become a rubber stamp? Are traditional outlook prevalent till in the present society?

5.6 Case 6

Mrs. Sultana begum laskar is a Zilla Parishad member of the Rangpur part I which is located near the Silchar town of Cachar district. She was found to belong to an educated family and she passed higher secondary. As a women political leader, she wishes to do for women in society. With her initiative, many women self-help groups were made in the village level. She organized meeting at the Gaon Panchayat level and suggested the women group to avail their right in constitutional manner. Most of the time, she organized many women awareness programme like reproductive health, importance of NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), Widow pension Scheme and so on. With the help of her personal initiative, a large numbers of women were found to be active in local politics. From this case, it is cleared that educated women can play an important role in politics.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

To conclude we can say that the participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institution particularly in Barak Valley is low and for their activities they are dependent on others. Most of the time, they are not in a position to take a decision on their own and are not able take positive decision. The findings of these case studies shows that the progress of women in panchayati raj institution is slow and it will take more time to attain women's goal. Because women are irregular in the Panchayat activities due to worth missing their daily wage and worry about their crying babies and family. It is also fact that the women who have come in under caste reservation have come out with their social and economic disadvantages – mostly illiterate, with little productive assets, largely dependent on wage labour and into a rural society that has fixed places for various castes and gender.

In the course of conducting the study it is realized that some measures are required to be taken to promote women's participation in politics. So it may be suggested that elected women in each district may develop a network among them and hold meetings and discussions on routine basis about necessary measures to promote their participation and neutralize male domination in local-self bodies. The present study presents low level of education in this case study which is not a good sign for a healthy democracy. Thus, it is important to make extra educational training programmes related to politics for enhancing knowledge of elected women members on government policies and programmes, bureaucratic structures and the issues of local concern. For this, government may make provision for mandatory attendance of an Awareness Programme/Orientation Programme by members of PRIs. Sensitization of male members in PRIs is equally important so that they listen to women patiently, converse politely, acknowledge their suggestions in the meetings and implement them wherever feasible. It would lead to psychological empowerment of women.

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