

# Ensuring Women's Empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions: A study of West Bengal

## Abstract

The concept of women empowerment becomes relevant in the context of unequal relationship between men and women. Although the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act of the constitution provided one third reservation (now 50%) for women but it is a necessary though not a sufficient condition for their empowerment. Representation of women in Panchayats will be real and effective only if it leads to their empowerment. This paper examines the conditions which will ensure the empowerment of women representatives. It is based on an exploratory study of women's empowerment in West Bengal (Burdwan district) which was qualitative in nature consisting of case studies of 30 women Pradhans and Members.

**Keywords:** Panchayati Raj, Women Empowerment, factors and impediments, 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment

## Introduction

This paper starts with the assumption that women are a social and not a biological category. (Sassen, 2002, p. 376). Thus women must be considered in conjunction with men in the social division of labour i.e. in their roles, rights and obligations. Moreover, these sex specific roles, rights and obligations are not just different; they also tend to be unequal. In almost every sphere of human life, the roles defined for women are subordinated to those defined for men. An unequal relationship between men and women imply that men can exercise greater power than women. It is in this context that concept of women empowerment becomes relevant. Women's empowerment refers to women getting power leading to change in power relation and it is a multi-faceted processes which has the following dimensions (a) Social dimension having information and awareness about institutions of change, (b) Political dimension having the capacity to effectively engage in decision making processes and participating in collective decision making, (c) Psychological dimension having confidence and ability to initiate development. (Verma, 2006, p. 54)

## Aim of the Study

This paper examines the conditions which will ensure the empowerment of women representatives. It is based on an exploratory study of women's empowerment in West Bengal (Burdwan district) which was qualitative in nature consisting of case studies of 30 women Pradhans and Members, The perception and experiences of 30 women Pradhan and members reveal that there are some factors which ensure women Empowerment and there are some impediments which prevent for their Empowerment. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment (1993) to the constitution of India provided for one third (now raised to 50 percent) reservation of seats in the local bodies or Panchayats for women. Increasing the representation of women in Panchayats by the reservation of seats was not an end in itself; it was a means to an end -the end being the participation of women in decision making and development. Representation of women in Panchayats was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for their empowerment. This heralded a new chapter ensuring the representation of a large number of women in Panchayats at all levels but it was not at their own volition and it was sponsored by the state. Representation of women in Panchayats could be real and effective only if they participated in decision making and development i.e. they were empowered. It is necessary to study women's representatives in Panchayati Raj particularly after the passing of 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment act to find out the extent to which their representation is real and effective i.e. the extent to which

## Rifat Jabeen

Research Scholar,  
Advanced Centre for Women's  
Studies,  
Aligarh Muslim University,  
Aligarh

they are empowered and the factors and the impediments to their empowerment. This is a study of women's empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal to find out the extent to which empowerment has taken place and the factors and the impediments to the empowerment. West Bengal has been selected because it is in the for front in successful implementation of Panchayati Raj. It has implemented Panchayati Raj by holding elections to all the three tiers consistently from 1978 in every five years. The West Bengal government took steps for one third reservation of seats for women participation in the panchayat bodies before the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act 1993 was passed. The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 1992, provided for reservation of one third of the total seats in panchayat bodies for women. Prabhat Datta says that West Bengal is unique in the implementation of Panchayati Raj for three reasons. First, it was the first state in the country to go in for one third reservation of seats for women. Secondly, the objective conditions for effective and real participation were created through land reforms as a result of which, unlike the other parts of the country, West Bengal had created history by making it possible on the part of the small marginal and landless farmers to get elected to the panchayat bodies. Panchayats in West Bengal are free from the clutches of the landed gentry and from upper caste dominance ensuring free and fare participation of the deprived people such as Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Women at large way. And thirdly, West Bengal was the first state in the country to bring in through elections more women than that were stipulated in the legislation. In 1993 elections about 35% women were elected in gram Panchayat. (Datta,1995, p.74). West Bengal is also unique in holding panchayat elections on party basis for the first time in India in 1978. There was considerable opposition to the involvement of political parties in local elections but the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and its allies preferred the official recognition of parties in the Panchayats elections. They believed that the direct involvement of political parties in the panchayat institutions would make its leadership more disciplined and responsible in managing these institutions of rural democracy and could put an end to landed gentry and upper caste domination in Panchayati Raj Institutions (Mathew, 1995, p. 18).

### Review of Literature

West Bengal is unique in many ways in implementing Panchayati Raj Institutions but there is a dearth of empirical studies on Women's Empowerment in Panchayati Raj Institutions to explore their real problems in West Bengal in general and Burdwan district studies in particular.

Person (2009) on his paper says that the reservation bill has increased women's participation in the Gram Panchayats. The inhabitants of this area of West Bengal very much welcome the reservation bill and its effects on women's participation. Women do not only occupy position power but they also attracted women followers and so they were empowered.

Women were relieved to find when they go to panchayat office that they can speak to a woman who is more responsive to their needs. Study determinants for empowerment, finding that education is an extremely important factor affecting the possibility for empowerment while the social norms and Indian history may work negatively in the sense that people do not accept women leaders. The role of the party in this area strong with the consequences that women, even though having a powerful position, must follow the party. This, however, is a problem that not only women face, but men as well.

The ground level experience of the first two years after women entered the panchayati raj in west Bengal has been captured vividly by Ashim Mukhopadhyay (1996) through extensive interviews with women office bearers and panchayat members. Locating patriarchy as the major constraint mukhopadhyay points out that the male members believe that women must perform the role of house wives and do not expect that women to become pradhan or members discussing development issues, health problems and funds. Thus women have to perform a dual role at homes and in the Panchayats. Role conflict inherent in the situation in which women are expected to pay equal attention to being a good housewife and at the same time engaging in panchayat work as member or pradhan. Patriarchy is also manifest in the restriction imposed by male guardians on the movements and activities of women panchayat representatives who are family members and this is a serious impediment to the functional success of the elected women.

Not only to these women have to fight patriarchy within the family and the rural society, but also the attitudes of male members of all political parties- most of who occupy key positions in decision making- who are a stumbling block to their real empowerment. It is the party which decides upon all crucial matters of the local gram panchayts and so takes control of it. No one can defy the political party and so women members also have to listen to its command and cannot take decisions independently. All the development work, all beneficiary, lists are decided beforehand at the party office and the women representatives just carry out the decisions of the party. The fact that female panchayat members are forced to yield to the ruling diktat of political party restricts their empowerment.

Mondal & Ghosh (2014) found that maximum women are elected in first time in Panchayat and more than (40 per cent) to (50 per cent) seats are occupied by the women in Zilla- Parishad, Panchyat Samiti and gram panchayat level of study area. Half of samples women members belonged to SC community. It was also seen that most of the women members have educational level of more than ten class pass. It show that age group with maximum women members was 30 to 49 years. Age was a significant factor because middle age group of 30 to 49 years can take more responsibility in Panchayat and also at home both together. Majority women

participated in election to help the people, pressurized member. Only some women attended the meeting regularly and significant number of women have not attended any meeting because they were engaged in household work and had to give time to children. Problems faced by women were lack of knowledge of paper work particularly in financial matters, non-cooperation on the basis of gender discrimination and male members did not give preference to her opinion in decision making in panchayat work. To overcome these problems it was necessary that women have to participate regularly in panchayat meetings. After participation in Panchayat election most of the women members think that it increased their respect/popularity in villagers, it also helped to change their attitude toward the people of the village and increased awareness and knowledge in socio, economic and political issues.

Ghosh and Kumar (2015) say that the age of all gram panchayat women members falls in the middle age group (35-50 years). Nearly all the women gram pradhans/ deputy pradhans/ panchayats are class eight 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 panchayat. The responsibilities of pradhans include implementing land reforms, identifying beneficiaries for land transfer, IRDR loans, agriculture extension programmes, employment programmes (such as NREP, RLEGP, JRY) housing and other welfare programmes, raising local revenues from taxes and non-tax sources and administering local infrastructure projects. Most of the activities done by the women members are scheme-oriented and they are functioning as the agent of the government for implementing the scheme. Most of the women are housewives and are economically dependent on their male counterparts. 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 contest 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 husband or other male members of the family. Most of them said that their husbands helped them regarding their constituency work. Only some female Pradhan and Upa Pradhan who are educated actively participate in the meeting of the gram sabha and are involved in the decision-making process. Few women members put demand before the general meeting of the gram panchayat. This is because of lack of education, family workload, lack of movement, ignorance regarding rules and regulations of gram panchayat and lastly male dominance over them.

Chaudhuri (2001) in this paper examines the role of women in the panchayati raj institution on the basis of data collected by interviewing female panchayat members of Bolpur Sriniketan block in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal. The performance of the women panchayat members has been studied as

by her husband, family member and political party per attendance in panchayat meetings, participation in development activities and level of awareness about their political responsibilities. The researcher found out through this study that 52 percent of women members did some development work in their villages. One reason behind the lack of interest in Panchayati work activities, as reported by women members, was lack of adequate education and training to understand the objectives, scope and method of implementation of development programmes. According to some women, lack of knowledge of English and poor knowledge of Bengali were also factors that hindered their activities. Engagement in household chores and poor transport were other important factors responsible for the poor performance of women members.

Women did not want to contest election for membership but were forced by their husband, relatives or party members to do so. In order to reap the benefits of reservation, participation of women in Panchayats must be spontaneous. If the wives, daughters, sisters and other female relatives of panchayat members and party leaders are inducted into the Panchayati Raj system, the purpose of reservation is lost. Reservation is not an end, but only a means, to enable women to be empowered as independent individuals. The present survey shows that, as the first group of elected members in the reserved seats, the performance of these women is not too bad. They are gradually becoming aware of their responsibilities as well as of development programmes. But a lot remains to be done. It is expected that in future, education, training and cooperation from family will help rural women to emerge as successful political leaders.

Rajiv Sen (2013) says that one of the most significant social changes that is being brought about by reservation of seats in panchayat raj institutions is the empowerment of women. 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. The lack of knowledge and awareness of election and electoral processes and low level of literacy among women are major barriers in participating in elections and in decision making. Rural social structure is still male dominated and is also a barrier to the participation of women in Panchayats and in decision making. Therefore economic self-sufficiency is one of the major pre-conditions for political empowerment of

women. Their dependence on their husband or male members of the family restricts their full participation in decision making.

### Method of the Study

Since there are few empirical studies of Women's Empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal, this study was carried out in the Burdwan district of West Bengal which was divided into 6 sub divisions and out of these Asansol sub division was selected randomly. It consisted of 4 Blocks and 35 Gram Panchayats with the total seats of 355 in the panchayat election held in 2013. Out of these 355 seats, women members were 175(49.29%) and men were 180.

### Research Design

The study was based on exploratory research design because implementation of the 73rd amendment of the constitution and empowerment of women through Panchayati raj institutions in West Bengal has hitherto remained relatively unexplored with few empirical studies. The research was qualitative in nature because much, but not all, exploratory research is qualitative (Ahuja, 2003, p. 40).

### Hypothesis

No hypothesis was used in this research because construction of hypotheses is neither advocated nor practiced in qualitative research (Kumar, 2011, p. 88).

### Sampling

The case study methods was used in this research so as to know as much as possible about different aspects of an individual on the assumption that the individual represents of the group and hence will provide insight into the group. It was focused on the understanding and clarification of perceptions and experiences of women members and Pradhan collected through indepth interviews using unstructured open ended interview schedule and participant observation. The case studies were selected using purposive, judgmental or information oriented sampling technique because the information needed had to be provided by those who could articulate it. Since the research was qualitative, only the non-probability sampling designed was used and so no randomisation attempt was made in selecting a sample (Kumar, 2011, p. 206 and Ahuja, 2003, p.179). Researcher purposely selected those 'information-rich' respondents who could provide information needed. In this way, 30 women Pradhan and members were selected. The sample size in qualitative research does not play any significant role as the purpose is to study only few cases. In qualitative study researcher does not have a predetermined sample size but during the data collection phase, waits to reach a point of data saturation. When there is no new information available, then it is assumed that it is a point of data saturation and data collection is stopped (Kumar, 2011, p. 192).

### Analysis of data collection

The perception and experiences of 30 women Pradhan and members reveal that there are

three factors which ensure empowerment and six impediments which prevent the empowerment.

The three factors which ensure the Empowerment of Women are  
**Education**

Education at least upto secondary level is most important for empowerment of women because it enables them to read and write and discharge their duties in the panchayat effectively without depending on others. They can fill up the forms for panchayat election, understand the rights and responsibilities of panchayats members, know the rules and regulations of panchayats, become aware of different programmes and policies, check their mails, read documents, reply to letters and prepare the agenda for meetings. They can actively participate, raise issues, put proposal and involve themselves in decision making. Educated women can handle development work and carry out welfare activities .without education women are just name sake members of Panchayats and their husband and other male relatives become proxy pardhans and members to carry out panchayat work on their behalf while women sign on the dotted line. Education is so important that many members emphasis need for making education upto secondary level mandatory for standing for election to panchayat office.

### Political experience

Political experience is vital for the empowerment of Women in Panchayati Raj because in these way even women lacking in education become active and empowered. Their political experience as members of the party enables them to manage panchayat work .They participate in meeting of political parties in which they have to become aware of programmes and policies, conscious of rights and responsibilities, acquire confidence to speak in public and this required them to develop the ability to read and write. They attend the panchayat meetings regularly and raise issues, put proposal and participate in decision making. They fill up the form themselves and campaign from door to door and address rallies and processions which are organized by the party. They do a lot of development work in their village and initiate a number welfare measures and able to answer questions put to them about it.

### Role of Party

Political party plays a prominent role in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in west Bengal. Even though there is reservation for women, it is the party which enables women to get seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions by giving them tickets. Thus the party is indispensable for inducing women to come out from their homes for participating in public life. The party is everything in West Bengal so that Pradhans and members are there in the Panchayats because of the will of the party and will cease to be there if the party does not want them. It also helps them to contest the elections by organizing rallies and processions and in carrying out development work. Party helps by giving advice and by making priority list of problems for gram sabha. The party is a mentor which constantly guides

panchayat pradhans and members particularly women.

The factors which are impediments

### **Interference by Political Party**

Although Political party is indispensable for empowerment of women, it also interferes with their empowerment by taking all the decisions itself without giving women any autonomy. Before Gram Panchayat meeting, women are directed about the programmes to be undertaken, beneficiaries to be covered, and decisions to be taken by the leaders of political parties. In this way, the party acts as impediments to women empowerment because they have to work under pressure from the party and as directed by it. Women have no freedom in Panchayats matters and they become just puppets of political parties.

Involvement of political party in the selection of women is also an impediment for putting up suitable candidates and ensures their empowerment. Party selects those women who are kin of its male members and prevents deserving women from being candidates. In this way, many capable, efficient and active women are eliminated and, instead novice, passive and inefficient women are elected in to Panchayats.

Members owe their primary loyalty to their party which has brought them in to politics and not to the people by whom and for whom they have been elected. Members belonging to opposition party are not empowered because they are not allowed to participate in panchayat work by the ruling party. Pradhan, who belong to the ruling party, deliberately excludes them from panchayat work. They cannot attend panchayat meetings because the pradhans consciously do not send them the notice on time as they do not want any opposition members to be present in panchayat meetings. Even if opposition members somehow manage to attend meeting, the pradhans ignore what they propose and see to it that the work is not done. They also do not assign any panchayat duties to them and so opposition members can not carry out development works and welfare activities among the people who elected them.

### **Patriarchy in the Family and the Party**

In spite of reservation of seats for women in Panchayats in West Bengal, women have to depend on their male kin in order to contest election. These women members enter into politics for protecting the constituency of their male relatives who cannot contest the elections because of the reservation of seats for women. In such case women members are forced into politics by their family against their own wish. These women members are always prepared to vacate the seat for their male relatives as soon as it is de reserve. They do not have any real power but rather it is the male relatives who are empowered on their behalf and they merely serve the patriarchal interest of family.

There is also patriarchy in the party since there are very few women members in political party and even fewer in key positions. Thus party is dominated by men both in numbers as well as in key positions in decision making. When political parties

take decision upon all crucial matters of the local gram Panchayats, it is not women who are taking these decisions. Female panchayat members are force to yield to male dominated political party and it does not lead to the empowerment of women. It just strengthens patriarchal interest within the party.

### **Ineffectiveness of Training Programme**

Training programme for women representatives are necessary for learning how to carry out panchayat work because most of the women members have no experience about Panchayats and there is no one to guide them in performing their duties. Ineffectiveness of the existing training programme is a major problem for women representatives in performing their role at the Gram panchayat. The programme is too short to be able to give adequate training to new members. Effective training programme is one which has sufficient duration in training women for panchayat work.

### **Low income and Inadequate Travelling Allowance**

In West Bengal, land distribution to the rural poor and marginal farmers and 'Operation Barga' shifted power, to a great extent, in favour of the rural poor by bringing them in large numbers into Panchayats. This means that the women elected under reservation also belong mostly to poor women. Most of the women are unemployed housewife from family of low income group of below rupees 10 thousand per month. The problem they face is that of spending a lot of money on conveyance which they cannot afford. The travel allowance which is paid to them is inadequate to cover a cost of conveyance. It is necessary to increase a travel allowance to pay it after each meeting.

### **Distance of Panchayats meetings and their timing**

Women find difficult to attend meetings that are held far away from their homes which often continue till late in the evening. These problems are not faced by their male counter parts but women need a male escort and so they cannot be as effective in panchayat work as men. It is necessary to adjust the distance and timings of panchayat meetings so that women can attend them and this will go a long way for the empowerment of women.

### **Role conflict between the role in Panchayats and role at home**

The major problem preventing the empowerment of women is role conflict because women have to perform their role in Panchayats along with their role in performing household chores and sometimes supplementing the income of the family by taking up the jobs. They face difficulty in rearing their children and cooking food for the family and at the same time coming to panchayat meeting and earning money for the family. This problem can be resolved if the male kin can share some of the burden of household chores while women are doing panchayat work.

### **Conclusion**

So we can evaluate that the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act of the constitution provided one third reservation (now 50percent) for women but it is a necessary though not a sufficient condition for their

empowerment and representation of women in Panchayats will be real and effective only if it leads to their empowerment. The perception and experiences of 30 women Pradhan and members reveal that there are three factors which ensure empowerment and six impediments which prevent the empowerment. These factors and impediments are sufficient to prove that reservation is necessary but not sufficient condition for women's empowerment.

## References

1. Persson, J. (2009). *The Impact of a Quota System on Women Empowerment: A field Study in West Bengal, India*. 191 , 1-70. Sweden: *Nationalekonomiska Institutionen*.
2. Mukhopadhyay, A. (1996). *Coming of Women into Panchayati Raj*. occasional paper no. 2 , first series, pp. 1-40.
3. Kumar, G. G. (2015). *Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institution: A block level study of West Bengal*. *journal of Agri Search* , 1 (3), 188-192.
4. Sarkar, S. M. (2014). *Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj and Decentralised Planning: A study in Sagar Block South 24 Parganas, District of West Bengal*. A peer-Reviewed Indexed *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* , III (II), 49-56.
5. Sen, R. (2013, April). *Women Political Participation through Panchayati Raj Institution in West Bengal*. *Indian Stream Research Journal*, 3(3).
6. Chaudhuri, O. M. (2001). *Against Heavy Odds: Women in West Bengal Panchayats*. New Delhi: MANUSHI.
7. Verma, R. (2006). *Empowerment: Concept, Objective and Strategies*. In H. a. R.B.S Verma, *Empowerment of the Weaker Sections of the India* (p. 54). New Delhi: Serial Publisher.
8. Ahuja, R. (2003). *Research Methods*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication.
9. Mathew, G. (1995). *Panchayati Raj From Legislation to Movement*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
10. Datta, P. (1995). *Women and Panchayat Bodies in India*. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 56(1/4), 66-77.
11. Kumar, R. (2011). *Research Methodology, a step by step guide for beginners* (3rd edition ed.). New Delhi: Sage Publication.