

Empowerment of Schedule Castes' Women by Means of the Mandates of the Art 243 D in Gram Panchayat : A Study of the District of North 24 Paraganas in the period 2013 -2018

Abstract

Mythology and cultural plateau of India place women in glorious position, but reality proves the opposite. Women's share in every sphere of life in rural areas is almost nil. The situation is grave in case of backward segments. The Government has been providing various legal means for establishing of women's entitlement. The foremost important step is the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992, which provides reservation of seats for women in Local Self- Government. The aim of this study is to evaluate degree of the Article 243 D's achievement by a sample of Gram Panchayats of North 24 Paranas in West Bengal.

Keywords: Women's Entitlement, Empowerment, Article 234 D, Reservation Policy, Participation of S. C. Women.

Introduction

"India"-- If we just hear the term and close our eyes, an idol appears in our mind, such as a beautiful women wearing sari, wrapped up with tri-coloured flag, holding crown and ornament. Again the river Ganges and the Earth are also idolized as Goddess. It is very clear that the Indians possess such a culture which symbolized all necessary particulars for a civil life as women. Our orthodox texts give an account of occupying a glorious position by women. These could compel an outsider to seem that women in India possess much more superior status than men. But the reality shows a reverse picture. India is having a history of gradual deterioration of status of women. While Vedic period is regarded as golden age on the context of women's status when they enjoyed equal status with men, but it began to decline with the *Smritis* and Islamic invasion. History shows many events in favour of this like *Sati*, *Jauhar*, *Devdasi* etc. Though various reform movements were carried out during the period of British Raj but such movements made only limited contribution towards uplifting of the status of women during that era. Women are compelled to take a secondary position to their male counterparts in relation to infant mortality, general education, employment, political status and so on. Women suffer from lack of opportunities, therefore capacity to influence socio-political decisions. The scenario of villages is more dark. This case is also true in political sphere. The role played by women can be well understood from the statistics of parliamentary elections and the seats occupied by the women candidates since 1952, the first *Lok Sabha* Election to till date. In the 1st Lok Sabha, it was 14 out of 489 members. Women never secured more than 10 per cent of the total seats before 15th *Lok Sabha* Election and again the present figure is not satisfactory either.

In developing countries state intervention is always regarded as an instrument of development and since the dawn of independence our government is very keen about the development of our society especially the backward segment as well as uplifting of status of women in all aspects. The Preamble of our Constitution recognizes the principals of social economics and political justice to all of Indian citizens. Article 14 removes all inequality before the law and equal protection by the law for all. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth and also provides that state may make special provisions for women and children. Article 16 provides equality of opportunity in governmental employment. Besides there were the amendments like Child



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Marriage Restraint Act 1929, Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, Hindu Marriage Act 1954, Hindu Succession Act 1956 and so on. There is no room for questioning the hearty efforts made by our Constitution-makers and Governments.

Still the picture regarding the status of women is quite dismal. It should be recognized that lack of participation and lack of involvement in political process and public action delimits the scope and expanse of women's agency. As a remedial measure to this problem, state intervention being the effective way, government has preceded with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (one-third seats for women have been reserved in Panchayati Raj Institution and in urban local bodies, respectively) as an instrument of giving legal authority to women in the local self-government.

The objective of the provision envisaged by Article 243 D is same.

The strategy of empowering women through reservation and enhanced participation however is not free from controversy. It is argued that the political empowerment through reservation and Panchayat i.e., local government levels will enhance socio-economic opportunities of women and will reduce social inequalities. Contrarily, it is also argued that only political empowerment without socio-economic empowerment will not be able to solve the problem of secondary status of women. In the context of this debate the present study intends to examine the issue of women empowerment through reservation of the seats in Panchayat specially empowerment of women who belong to scheduled castes with the problem in mind whether political reform in the shape of reservations really leads to socio-economic empowerment.

Review of Literature

In recent times a large number of books and articles have come up with the issue of status and role of women in the society. Thanks to proliferation of works on gender-studies and women's-studies. But the role of women for change as well as role of scheduled caste women in politics or the effects of participation in decision making process has not received the attention it deserves. Therefore, the present study derives its analytical framework and information not only from the books on women's empowerment but also from the writings on different aspects of women's status, role and participation in decision-making.

Geraldine Forbes in her "Women in Modern India" (1998), presented a historical account about the status of women in India from 19th century onwards. She focuses on the social reforms in 19th century, spread of women's education, establishment of women's organizations, their working and active role in nationalist movements. Having presented the historic details regarding the issue of women she focuses on the women in India has introverted themselves from the present day party-politics and the governmental efforts to bring them back in political sphere.

Seema P. Salgaonkar's "Women, Political Power and the State" (2006), is historical in nature

and reveals women's active role in freedom movement in India. It also exposes women's role as voters and grass-root leaders. She concludes by saying that the efforts of the state towards women's development are far below from expectation.

There also exists a set of books which are exploring the topic of women and politics in West Bengal. The following books are some of them:-

Jayashri Ghosh's book, namely "Political Participation of Women in West Bengal" (2000) is based on survey method. She focuses on participation of women in urban, local self-government encompassing two areas viz. Dum Dum Municipality and some other areas of North 24 Paraganas. She discusses about women's mind towards political matter in West Bengal and shows that there exists a wide gap between the degree of participation of men and women.

Shanghamitra Sen Chowdhury's "Women and Politics: West Bengal, A Case Study" (1995) is a study mainly concerned with the political participation of women in West Bengal. It explores the impact of socio-economic variables on electoral participation.

Another set of books which deserves mention are books on Panchayati Raj and women's role in it. Some of those are as follows:-

G. Palanithuri's "New Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu" (2003) presents a general view about the decentralization of power, the implication of 73rd Amendment of our Constitution as well as a case study of the Panchayat at work in Tamil Nadu. Here author also presents details of some author also presents details of some case analysis of some Gram Panchayat with special attention on the issue of empowering women and put forward the area of backdrops in the objective of the said act.

S.S. Chahar, in his edited book "Governance at Grassroots Level in India" (2005), explores the state of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Haryana, various Panchayati Act of the state. Here the author critically presents that the 73rd and 74th amendments were only able to give women a participatory role and empowerment is only formal.

D. Bandhopadhyay and Amitava Mukherjee in their "New Issues in Panchayati Raj" (2004) present firstly the discussion about 73rd and 74th Amendments and their effects. Authors give their suggestion about Panchayati Raj Institution. They present various programmes of the Panchayati Raj Institutions like SHG and its responsibilities. They have focussed on five districts of Madhya Pradesh. By this they show the paradox of reservation of seats for women and their powerlessness.

Swapan Kumar Pramanik and Prabhat Dutta's "Panchayats and People – the West Bengal Experience" (1994) presents a general history of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal, both in pre-independence and post-independence days. It also enshrines structure and restructure of Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal, its various programmes especially in Left Front era.

Other set of books which also include discussions on empowerment have also been

analysed to find out the proper topic for studying. A handful of such books are discussed below:-

Sushma Sahay's "Women and Empowerment: Approaches and Strategies" (1998) provides mostly a sociological analysis of the issue of women's empowerment. Her book explains the need for empowerment, meaning of the term "empowerment" and gives a scale to measure the degree of empowerment. This book also contains an analysis of the concept of economic empowerment and adds her suggestions.

Evlin Hust's book "Women's Political Representation and Empowerment in India" (2004) examines the process of women's political presence and empowerment following the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Here the author presents a study in the state of Orissa. This book reveals that reservation policy established political presence in a little manner but not the goal i.e. empowerment.

The researcher here also consulted some other contemporary books relating to the issue of women in India.

One of those books is Jasodhara Bagchi's edited volume "The Changing Status of Women in West Bengal 1970 – 2000, The Challenge Ahead" (2005). The editor here compiles eight articles and three different studies in different parts of West Bengal. The whole book very systematically and in simulative way presents the scenario of status of women in West Bengal. The book indicates that the gender gap in its all aspects in urban areas has decreased but the rural area shows the reverse picture of it. In women literacy rate, West Bengal stands first in India, but in respect of health and nutrition of women and children, West Bengal's performance is of a mixed type. The literacy rate relating graduation level has increased, but gender gap is much wider in higher studies. Women's representation in technical education is very low even today. The book shows that the place of women in socio-cultural life in West Bengal has been undergoing a gradual positive change, but these changes are yet to occur in rural areas. Though political participation of women, both in rural and urban areas, has increased after 73rd and 74th Amendments, but it does not indicate any true empowerment or uplift of the status of women in West Bengal. The condition of tribal women is much miserable than that of others.

Dr. Chandrakala Chidanand Banasode, has presented in her book "Role of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions" (2012), the fact that women in rural India are in more dark situation as in spite of their immense participation in developmental programme they are not appreciated whole heartedly. Women representatives are responding positively and favourably towards the community-needs which have resulted in increase of social interaction and thereby generating social prestige.

Thus it can be said that reservation policy made the way for depiction and the rest depends upon the person concerned. If women do well in

rendering services related to Panchayat, social prestige will definitely enhance.

Ramesh Madan in his article namely *Impact of Women's Representation in Indian Politics* in the edited book "Empowerment of Women: Emerging Dimensions" (2010) of Dr. Krishna Gupta, has put forwarded the similar thing. He has shown that due to the mandates of 73rd and 74th Amendment Act participation of women has increased. But it is also true that some women representatives are puppet of their male family members and some really has put success stories. It is often noticed that women members are heartily very concern about the requirements and problems of her community.

Lalit Yadav, in his "Panchayati Raj Institutions and Rural Development" (2011), through his study in the state of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh revealed that performance of the representatives of reserved category does not indicate significance difference with that of the level of performance of the representatives belonging to unreserved category, though reservation policy does not have considerable impact on social-psychology regarding customary pattern of exclusion for the people of reserved category both men as well as women, he suggested for taking into consideration of variable like education rather than reservation-type for comparative understanding of performance level.

Jean Dreeze and Amartya Sen has shown through their book "India: Development and Participation" (2002) that in north India inequalities in respect of caste still contravening proper representation.

Prabhat Dutta in his study "Women and Panchayat Bodies in India" (1992) has also observed that in West Bengal effective participation in Gram Panchayat from all segment of a village society had been bought through land reform and West Bengal has created an example of making it possible to be elected at Gram Panchayat body of the persons from small and marginal farmers and good number of women from the lowest strata of each caste as well as class of rural area.

Dr. Ravi Goswami, in his book "Panchayati Raj in India" (2012), shows that women are underrepresented in local government in whole Asia and pacific region. West Bengal is not an exception of it. The issue of women's share in managerial tasks of gram Panchayats is most measurable.

Kuldep Mathur has rightly pointed out, in his book "Panchayati Raj" (2013), that proper representation does not automatically leads to proper taking part. The study shows that women representatives who are facing odds most are really addressing vital local crisis form their core of heart.

Debjani Sengupta and Dilip Kumar Ghosh in their work entitled as "West Bengal: State and People Development and People's Choice" (2006) has shown the same. They have said that the poor literacy in this State significantly hampers the function of Panchayati Raj Institutions especially after the execution of the reservation policy. At the same time they also have said the situation is changing quite fast as women

members are enthusiastically participating in Panchayat in most cases.

"Panchayati raj Institution Gateway of Sushasan (Good Governance)" (2015), a book published by The Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, presents the Legal Provision regarding the structure and function of Panchayats and also includes the issue of devolution of power to it. It has accepted that lack of power and knowledge to perform their role specially in Gram panchayat level. It says that the Government has already introduced Backward Region Grant Fund Programme which has stimulated the development process in poor districts of any particular State. It also contained that the Government has already set its aim to the capacity building of Panchayats for sanitation in view of Sachh Bharat Mission. It also has detailed about the functioning of Panchayats and its major attainments.

Objective of the Study

It is often argued that rural women have not attained the real decisive power in Panchayati Raj Institutions. They are guided by the male members of their family and act as a proxy to the male members. Contrarily it has also been argued that women representations can address the issue concerning women more seriously. With reference to these presumptions the objectives of this work are:

to examine and explain the effects of reservation of seats for scheduled caste women in Gram Panchayat level in rural areas;

1. to study the effectiveness of the model Panchayati system in special reference to the achievement of perception behind the Article 243 D The;
2. to explore the present status of women belonging to that backward segment of the society;
3. to measure the degree of effectiveness of working of scheduled caste women in comparison to other women member in Gram Panchayat level;
4. whether state intervention through Article 243 D has enhanced the autonomy of women as equal social actor;
5. to compare the status S.C. women of member of Gram Panchayat;
6. to find out the positive catalyst in the process of women empowerment;
7. whether presence of women elected representative ensures better implementation of programmes for women i.e. whether women benefit more from the elected women members;
8. whether socio-economic empowerment should precede political empowerment or political empowerment enhances the role of women as social actor.

Hypotheses

The researcher seeks to explore the said problem on the basis of following hypothesis:

1. There is no association between participation as a member of Gram Panchayat and being an effective part of Gram Panchayat's body.

2. Political authority does not ensure any pioneering status to the women in that society she belongs to.
3. There is no determinate relation between political position and socio-economic condition of scheduled caste women.
4. There is a strong association between women's education and alertness and effective participation.
5. There is no association between having a family involved in politics and participation in Gram Panchayat.
6. There is a strong association between reservation of seats for women and women's participation in Gram Panchayats.

Methodology

The present research work is related with the district of North 24 Paraganas in the state of West Bengal and focuses on the issue of empowerment through reservation of seats for women in Gram Panchayat and concentrated in the performance of S. C. women under Article 243 D of the 73rd Amendment Act. West Bengal often is cited as pioneer to other states in India in respect of implementing the system of local self-government. The purpose is to sketch the real scenario regarding the status of women representative belongs to Scheduled Castes in Gram Panchayats. Therefore a district of the state of West Bengal has been taken as the area of the present study.

The study here relies on purposive sampling method keeping in mind the representativeness of the sample. The data have been collected through direct interview. There is some structured question with open ended questions to extract the reality. On the basis of collected data the hypotheses are tested through statistical means.

Here the sampling process is multi-staged. The area of study is the district of North 24 Paraganas as it is the district of highest female literacy rate, following Kolkata – a metropolitan city, of 71.72%. (North 24 Paraganas is a district of southern West Bengal, situated between 22°11'6" north and 23°15'2" north latitude and from 89°5' east to 88°20' east longitude. It is surrounded by Nadia in north, Bangladesh in north-east, South 24 Paraganas and Kolkata in south and Howrah, Hoogly in west. The district comprises of five sub-divisions which includes 22 blocks and 200 Gram Panchayat with a population of 8934286, encompassing an area of 4094.00 sq.k.m. The district's head quarter is Barasat.)

The reason behind selecting the female literacy rate as the basis of selecting district for drawing sample is that Plato's theory, Aurobindo's description as well as psychological theory of education assert that education is the means of developing alertness as well as awareness among the individual, which is closely associated with the faculty performing one's responsibility properly.

The aim is to measure the degree of efficacy of women representative in this area where female literacy is sound.

In the first stage of sampling the researcher selected 4 blocks on the basis of female literacy rate

and SC population in the district. Selected blocks are (i) Barrackpore- II, having highest female literacy rate of 73.50% ; (ii) Sandeshkhali-I, having lowest female literacy rate of 46.10%; (iii) Bangaon which is having highest SC population ; (iv) Basirhat –II which is having SC population. It is evident that at this stage, sampling process is purposive as the selection criteria is fixed beforehand. Gram Panchayats were selected for studying randomly. Two GP s were selected from each select blocks.

Table 1: Educational Attainment Rate of Women Gram Panchayat Member

	Level of education				
	Up to primary	From class six to ten	11 th to 12 standard	graduate	Post graduate
Number of women members	4	26	9	4	1

N=44

Source : data collected by the researcher .

- Many of them have become member of GP for the first time. Some are holding the position for two or three terms. Long political- association is almost nil. In 68.2% cases they are becoming GP member for the first time, 18.2% women member are elected twice and 13.2% ,very few, enjoys the membership for three times. More than three times, i.e. a long association is nil.

Table 2 : Duration of Political- Association.

Nature of candidature fro GP member

Table 3 : Age of Enternig Politics.

	Age-group			
	Up to 25	25-45	45-55	56 onwards
number of women representatives who become GP member for the first time	0	21	5	4

N= 30.

Source : the researchers first hand data.

In most of the cases they entering in young age (25-45). The percentage is 70%. 13% and 17% is the case of old age and middle age respectively.

- It is not that all women member are engaged in the execution of task of GP. 57% women members are assigned to responsibilities.
- The reservation of seats for women in general and for Scheduled Castes women ensures the participation of women in Gram Panchayatin both cases. Participation of women otherthan reserved seat has already been started.
- Though women member of Gram Panchayat in most of the cases receive party-ticket on the basis of their family background, meaning elder male family members' association with that particular political party. It is the common practice of all political party in West Bengal. But the positive sign is that many of them are aspirant for the next election.
- Women member of the winning party are only holding post (*Sanchalak*) in all cases. SC women and also women in general are not in a decision-making position as the all the decisions are taken by the majority in general board meeting.
- All woemen GP member including SC are enjoying social prestige after becoming a member of Grm Panchayat.

Findings

The findings of the present study are as follows –

- Presence of higher educated women in Gram Panchayat as member is not satisfactory. The post graduate women member are of only 2.3 %, graduate are of 9%, 20% of them possess secondary education; 59% of them having below secondary level education. There are also some women members having only primary education.

	First time	Twice	Thrice
Number of women representatives	30	8	6

N = 44

Source : the researchers first hand data.

- With reference to the previous findings (no.2), it is also to be noted that women are not being GP member in very young age (the researcher here judge the age up to twenty five as 'very young age') who are first time being so. There are some evidences of being party as well as GP member at old age, and middle age.

There is no significance difference regarding the performance levelof the Scheduled Castes women members comparing to the women member from unreserved segment of the population in that locality.

Conclusions

A deep analysis of the findings leads the resaercher to reach the followingconclusions-

- The policy of reservation of seats for women and especially reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes' women by the implementation of Art.243 has able to ensure women's participation in local politics as a member of Gram Panchayat. It is indeed a landmark in sphere of Governmental initiatives toeads women empowerment. It has widen the scope for women in rural area to take part in politics. Women now have started to come out their traditional sphere of activity as assigned in our male-dominated society.
- In under developed society it is regarded that state intervention is quite effective in bringing radical changes regarding social issues and it has been further affirmed by this evidence.
- Praticipation in Gram Panchayat as a member has expanded the sphere of women's role as social actor. This has brought social prestige to them. It is also motivating to the other to participate in politics.

4. There is no backwardness regarding the performance as a GP member by the Scheduled Caste women. Socio-economic backwardness is not a hindrance in efficacy.

With these aforesaid bright end of the fact this study also discloses some dismal pictures as follows –

1. Participation of SC women does not indicate empowerment of them as term refers to have decision-making capability with having an effective share in decision-making process. Again this participation is again nominal. They do not perform anything from their own instincts. Women members often guided by their male counterparts.
2. There also exists poor knowledge about the Panchayati system, functions of Gram Panchayat, associated rules, which is one of the major obstacles in the way of their performance.
3. Another serious shortcoming is the poor level of education among the female SC members.
4. On top of that the faculty of a women member is not being considered while assigning duty. All the posts (*Sanchalak*) are pre reserved for the party who secures the majority.
5. Further there is also lack of orientation regarding the women related programmes among the women member irrespective of caste.
6. There is also a lack of spontaneous involvement of SC women as well as women in general in politics. It is quite evident that women are entering to politics only for the female candidature in the reserved areas in a very old age. Spontaneity assures keenness. Therefore questions arise about the keenness of a women for being a member of GP and thereby performing assigned responsibility and serving the common women. Study reveals that all the women members are not getting the post i.e. *Sanchalak* or *Pradhan*. Again those who are in a post are not taking decisions by her own conscience.
7. They required support from their family first and then from Block administration to perform their duty effectively.

Proposal from the Researchers end

It is evident that the reservation policy regarding women representation in Gram Panchayat has only widened the number of female participation, but that does not refer to political empowerment. Hence to make this reservation policy effective, there is a need of supplementary policy formulation as well as implementation. More explicit policies should be meant for the capacity building of the women members of GPs.

During this course of study the researcher has felt some necessities which are expressed in following few lines in form of proposals –

1. Policy should be made from Government's end for much girl child enrollment in primary as well as secondary level school education in rural areas.
2. More training should be organised for the women representatives in GPs to make them well known

about the functions, responsibilities, jurisdiction of a GP as well as of a *Sanchalak*.

3. Government initiative regarding arranging some courses of counselling by professional psychologists should be made for the personality development of women GP members.
4. A clause should be incorporated in the corpus of rules regarding assigning duty to the female members of GP such as to select female member as *Sanchalak* on the basis of their educational attainment. More elaborately to select a person with best educational attainment for the most important post or duty.
5. Training also should be arranged for the computer-literacy for all members of GP with special care to the women member. These will help women members to utilize the scope to be empowered through the policy of reservation of seats in PRIs.

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Abbreviations

1. GP GramPanchayat
2. PRIs Panchayati Raj Institutions
3. SC Scheduled Castes