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## **Political Participation and Empowerment of Women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions: A Selected Case Study of Burdwan District of West Bengal**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper attempts to study the concept of democratic decentralization and participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). The state West Bengal has witnessed almost 40 years of long successful achievement in PRIs that is also considered as a Role Model throughout the country. The study will be based on primary evidence collected from Women Pradhans in selected blocks of Burdwan District (as per 2013 elections), West Bengal. As per the population data it is observed that district Burdwan comprises a substantial number of schedule castes and schedule tribes along with general caste population of women. The choice of district Burdwan is governed by the fact that the district happens to be one of the most advanced districts of West Bengal in terms of agriculture. Through participatory observation, selected case studies and structured interview methodology, the present work tries to find out how much is the political participation of women factor is able to materialize a concrete women empowerment model in the grassroots level. Finally based on Leadership Theory of management this paper will examine how this participation helps to grow a kind of leadership among women.

**Keywords:** Panchayati Raj Institutions, political participation of women, Women Pradhan

### **Introduction**

Since time immemorial, the ideology of division of labour forces women to be confined to the private sphere of life. Whereas the school of political science describes that Politics means a democratic, participatory, responsible and straight-dealing process. It was also mentioned in the International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights, 1966 that politics could form a humane and equitable society. One major therapy prescribed by women empowerment advocates that participation of women in political decision making level could bring a good connection between vibrant and participatory democracy and dignity of women community. Hence, three tier Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), a democratic, participatory rural administration-would be a right alternative to safeguard women's participation right as well as a platform for practicing their political decision making right. Considering this male hegemony, Indian Parliament also secured 33% seats in the three tier PRIs for women, through its 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment in 1992. This historic decision provides the women to share the seat with men, to raise their voice on issues concerning women oppression, suppression and related issues. It basically represents the revolutionary potential to change the face of the grassroots rural India through the Panchayati Raj Institutions. It ensures the participation of women in the local governance. The Panchayati Raj model of West Bengal is a decentralized three tier model that aims at empowerment of women in general. However, certain limitations were observed by Social Scientists in terms of women empowerment due to quota or political biasness in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in West Bengal. Like, for instance it has been observed that only those associated with the ruling party are members of the local governance. In a developing society women are considered to be the underprivileged ones and hence empowerment would mean their upliftment in all spheres of life. The primitive concept of empowerment for women meant giving them political power and making them economically independent. Wider participation of the people in the grass root level governance regardless of caste and gender is highly desired in a developing nation like India. Hence from this statement it could be pointed out that women's participation in the Panchayati Raj Institutions is necessary for successful democratic governance in the grass root level as women form a substantial share of the total population. However, the question of the women's participation arises because of their ignored social status in a male-controlled society.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Communication and development**

What is the significance of communication process? It is a fundamental question in communication studies. All we know that the elementary functions of communication is to inform, to educate, to entertain or to aware. But these are very broad, instead of specification to define the functions of communication. Now social scientists and policy makers have opined that the major notion of communication is 'development'. Even, if we consider the series of research papers, documentations and charters regarding communication, by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other accessories bodies of UN in the post 2000, then the changes of nomenclature on communication and its importance are significantly noticed. 'Communication for development: strengthening the effectiveness of the United Nations; Promoting the role of development communication in UN Organizations; Communication a key to human development; Role of UNDP in information and communication technology for development framework on effective rural communication for development or Communication for sustainable development' – are used in these papers or notifications or documentations issued by United Nations in the recent past . So, to design the messageof, 'why communication', we get a multilayered, interdisciplinary phenomenon as follows: Communication & development, Development & economic development, Economic development & political power transformation, Political power transformation & empowerment , and Participation, empowerment, development & democracy .

From these above points, stepwise interconnectedness of progresses could be observed. However, one more point should be noted before going to other area of discussion and that is there are some differences between economic growth and economic development. In our present discussion we are not bothered to discuss economic growth rather concept of economic development is closely related with our present analysis. Economic growth is a stamen of changes in national income based on GDP, production, expenditure or income, whereas economic development is a combination of socio, cultural and political perception. This kind of development is codified by Human Development Index (HDI).

PRIs are the organization for social change. The field report revealed that an upward, downward and horizontal communication network directly regulate the awaking, informing and sharing of information within the PRIs system. Within the system, the hierarchy sometimes creates administrative-scar. Democratization, decentralization and empowerment – these phenomena are more or less interconnected, and communication process is one of the traits for this interconnectedness. Praxis of Freirean theory commented on the role of dialogic action in social change. The nature of social change would be participatory, dynamic, interactional and transformative. PRIs are such organization and women empowerment is one of the important praxis of social change considered after Freire model. Recently when a group of 23 no of social scientist from different countries have met to chalk out the model of 'communication for Social Change, (CFSC)' they also opined community dialogue, cultural proximity and participatory action help a holistic motivation and mobilization of individual as well as community.

### **Political participation and development**

In a social development discussion, we have witnessed a historical event recently. Professor Amartya Sen described that the greatest event of the century has been the development of democracy. Mahub Ul Haq, father of human development paradigm, indicated that the most significant features of the present century are participation of people in democracy, self-realization of an individual and expansion and developing forms of democratic governance(Introducing the Human Development and Capability Approach).Describing the changes of twentieth century, Siddiqui (2004), pointed out two interdependent variables that has changed the scenario considerably. First one is the development of natural science and technology and remaining one is the ideological shift. The science and technology offer immense material resources that help to glitter the world. This is unprecedented. These technological invasions and flow of information help to restructure the social norms and attitudes too. Finally it creates a sense in human mind to build up an ideal social environment (Siddiqui, 2004). In the Indian perspective these observations are truly important, because of its vast geographical domain, a stable democratic decentralized governance and plurality of the human resource (social capital). The discourse of the present article is the degree of decentralization of rural democratic governance and scope of people's participation in it. The political participation and the social development are too interlinked in the Indian subcontinent. The political participation of the common people could get a reasonable share-out of the economic development process. Self – realization of an individual

plays a greater role to serve the society, and this kind of loyalty is more efficient as compared to any other groups such as family or a nation. From the context of present discourse we will try to analyze how the political participation in the grass root governance, like in the three tier Panchayat system could bring about the social development. The term social development is popularly used to refer to the process of inducing changes in societies. In the present circumstance, the society refers as the rural area. After Machiavelli (Italian Historian), it could be a 'strong nation state' that can create the economic and social goals in individual as well as in collective levels. From 2007 onwards, Haywood, in his series of articles discussed about the western modern ideologies and historical background of development. He opined that an ideology is a more or less sets of ideas that provide the basis for organized political action. This action could modify the existing system of power. So this is a paradigm of economic development that explains how political change can and should be brought about how to get from an existing political order to a model of desired future, a vision of a good society. At present there are more than 6 lakhs villages in India. The three tier PRIs are able to set a democratic, participatory administrative organization till village level. This political ideology is deeply embedded within a set of perspective beliefs. It has a powerful element and attraction too. Rural villagers those are accepted this ideology usually reject the old one and try to formulate a new social system through political participation. It becomes more significant when at least 33% representatives of total have selected rural women including schedule caste and schedule tribes. These women could participate directly in rural administration, political communication or taking a final decision in grassroots level. After social scientists, these collective responsibilities and actions are nothing but a feature of social, political and economic empowerment of rural women. So here political institution helps to get an integrated social development. Midgley, social scientist defined social development as a process of planned social change designed to promote the wellbeing of the population as a whole and in combination with a dynamic process of economic development. What is the aim of participation of women in any grassroots level people's organizations like three tier PRIs? Already we defined it categorically – to bring the social development, holistic and integrated in nature. What is development? The definition of development could be explained as a development in social, economic and psychological aspects even in human rights perspective. Though the dominant paradigm, the dependency paradigm and the concept of participation among others, development theorists have continually advocated newer paradigms, concepts theories and models. The aim of these new approaches is to try and bring about complete development (Muppidi, 2001). Sachs (1993) defines 'development' as much more than a social economic endeavor. The three tier Panchayat system holds an interdisciplinary notion. Being a people's organization it offer political and social participation, those could bring an economic development of the participator. The indicators for measuring the level of social development are a matter of debate. But generally education, employment and income levels, child mortality rates, expectations of life at birth, maternal mortality rate, and availability of safe drinking water or provision of toilets are the important indicators of social development. Interestingly, if we consider the check list of basic functions and duties of the elected Panchayat bodies, then it will be revealed that all the aforesaid indicators are in their list. Again, success and failure of some indicators solely depend on individual woman's physiological, psychological, mental and social participation. In the present global society (Global Village), the new strategy of development could be designed to consider two specific factors- democratic polity and economic development. The aim of this model is to change the entire life style of the people through social, cultural, political and economic nomenclature.

### **Empowerment, gender issues and development**

Before going to discuss about the issue of empowerment in the light of rural participatory administrative institution like PRIs, we want to mention about the concept of 'civic community, civic involvement and social capital' after Robert Putnam. Though his work focused on modern civilized Italy on civic transition, but his ideologies about democratization of society, diversity and trust within communities, degree of confidence in local government and local leaders, credibility on local or low cost media, lower political effectiveness – that is, self-assurance in one's own influence etc. are closely related with the issues of development and empowerment. His theory helps us to define how social involvement stimulate and mobilize a social cohesion in a defined society. This consistency is a sign of shifting from a patriarchal oppression to social cultural and political empowerment in rural society. Rural social capital means these empowered motivated rural villagers.

Post World War II, historical overview of development and development communication theories were broadly divided in seven phases (Melkote, 2010). These divisions are genesis of Organized Development Assistance, development of emerging third world, first decade of development, second decade of development, alternative conceptions of development, third

decade of development and decade of the 1990s and beyond. Among them period of pessimism i.e. Second Decade of Development, (1970s), first recognized about the gender gap or the women empowerment issues in the discourse of development. Based on Marxist thought, it was expressed for new economic arrangements to create more even distribution of rewards in society. This conception was quite different from the previous one that was read as the economic and cultural expansion and imperialism of modernization. It was a phase of liberation. This perspective patronized personnel and communal liberation from oppression is seen as the key to 'empowerment' and self-reliance. These are the goals of development that contain three major strata – participation, women and development and sustainable development. Actually empowerment means the process by which individuals, organizations or communities gain control. It is a goal of development from liberation and other related perspective.

Empowerment is a big term that includes socio-political and economic upliftment of women (Singhal & Papa 2006). In these circumstances we could start the discussion about the local organization and notion of development. Several empirical and social studies concluded that local organizations are necessary for speedy rural development. More specifically an effective local self-government ensures the higher productivity and welfare of the majority of rural people (Melkote, 2001). Self-governing rural local bodies are described as the democratic decentralization where women's participation may be used both for support by an agency and as a control device by the law-makers. Participation maybe direct or indirect, formal or informal; it may be political, social or administrative in nature. Women's sharing in Panchayati Raj institutions may take many forms. It refers to all those behavior patterns which show the involvement of women in the processes and administration. It ensures their participation in policy formulation and programme planning and implementation and evaluation of policies. Decision making processes in Panchayats need to be better defined, to reduce the possibility of elite capture, proxy participation and single point decision.

### **Participation of Women in PRIs**

Political participation means the direct or indirect participation of men and women voluntarily in the formation of public policies. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) ensures reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women which should not be less than 33% in the three tier Panchayati Raj institutions. However, equality in opportunity does not necessarily assure effective political participation of women. Several inter-related social and cultural factors results in the non-participation of women in the PRIs or the local governance. It is basically the consequence of socio-cultural constraints established in the form of gender inequalities and in differences. The multiple identities of women eventually results in non-political identity and limited contribution of women in the local governance. Empowering women through their active participation in politics is prescribed by the social science advocates as a possible therapy. Participation of women in local governance or political forum not only gives them the constitutional platform where they can stand as equivalent as their male counterparts but can also raise their voice or express their opinion towards issues related to women. It also gives them the much needed identity in an otherwise male lead society as well as the political set up.

According to United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), political participation where women participate alongside is required for mobilization. Better representation of women in the country's politics and local governance will eventually lead to amplified empowerment. Further, UNIFEM also states that when there is equal distribution and balance of power between male and female, with no particular dominance, there remains scope of empowerment of women in every sense. Equal access to opportunities and increased awareness about the right of women are also viewed as essential elements of women empowerment. The Constitution of India ensures gender equality and rights that automatically extends to the political rights of the women as well. True democracy means equal participation of men and women in running good governance and in all the decision making levels. Women's empowerment would not be considered complete without the participation of women in every sphere and goals of life. Political empowerment of women suggests the level of liberty and fairness enjoyed by women when it comes to decision-making and sharing of consensus in any matter of the society at large.

Figures show that there has been an increase in the number of women contestants in the past few years. In the year 2009, a total of 556 women contested for the Lok Sabha elections, which constitutes around 6.9% of the total number of contestants. In the year the ratio was around 6.5% of the total number of women contestants (355) of the Lok Sabha elections (Participation of Women, 2014). Women in local governance mostly fail to perceive their role properly as the panchayat pradhan because they lack adequate training, knowledge, literacy and most importantly exposure (Datta, 2006). In

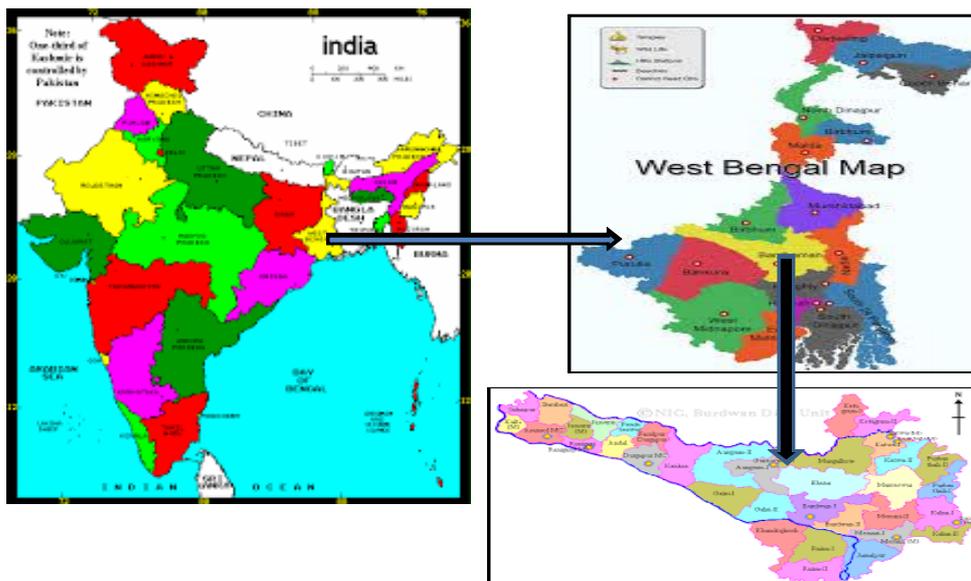
most of the cases they belong to family with some political background and they are nominated as the seats are reserved for 'women candidates' only. If while working as the gram pradhan, they develop a sense of independence and dedication then contrarily it causes displeasure in the eyes of the male members who perhaps have nominated them for the concerned post. It shows that women are still considered inferior in the society.

The present paper analyses the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in providing concrete empowerment scopes to women. The reason for selecting PRIs is that it exists at the grass root level and it can help in providing the women of the villages a scope of empowerment and self-dependence. As (Datta, 2006) points out that "the three-tiered panchayats constitute the foundation on which stands the entire edifice of rural development in West Bengal." The gram panchayats are in full responsibility of the planning and implanting of different development schemes. Women who are illiterate and are restricted to the four walls of the house in rural areas often are subjected to violence and abuse. A woman holding some privilege at the PRIs can help in resolving the issues against women and in handling the violence.

### Case Studies

Burdwan district of West Bengal had been selected for the study. As per 2011 census, total population of the district is around 7723663. There are 31 Blocks and its constituent 277 Gram Panchayats under major 6 Sub-Divisions (Kalna, Katwa, Asansol, Burdwan Sadar(North), Burdwan Sadar(South) and Durgapur of Burdwan District(Bardhaman District). Panchayat elections in this district since 1978 till 2013 have been vibrant.

## Geographical position of District Burdwan



Jamalpur and Khandaghosh Blocks of sub-division Burdwan Sadar (South) (Burdwan District) had been selected for the purpose of the study. Few Mahila (female) Pradhans were interviewed. This paper is entirely based on the primary data obtained from the female gram pradhans through interview method. We have developed the following case studies on the basis of the assessment of the classified information obtained –

### Case Study I

The name of the first panchayat surveyed is Berugram Gram Panchayat of Khandaghosh Block. Smt. Jhuma Hazra is the present pradhan of this panchayat. The post was reserved for ST candidate. Her husband is an active party member. He accompanies his wife to the panchayat office and other official visits and she attends all the gram panchayat meetings with him by her side. When discussed about decision-making power, the wife and husband along with other male members of the panchayat take decisions. In this case, the panchayat pradhan feels that decisions taken jointly are in the best interest of the

village and its people at large. For approaching the female pradhan, the husband has to be approached first. Further, for official matters the male members has to do all the running from pillar to post to get the works done and hence decisions taken by them are considered final and in the best interest of the people.

### **Case Study II**

Second panchayat visited was Paratal II of Jamalpur Block. Name of the elected pradhan of the panchayat is Smt. Mabia Begum. She is presently serving her second term and has been elected consecutively for the second term following reservation of seat for female candidates. She has come to politics because of her husband. Pradhan of Paratal II panchayat is active and takes decisions quite independently after taking into account everyone's point of view and opinions. She decides on the tenders and has been actively working on the constructions of toilets in every household in the village. People of the village approach her directly for their problems and for seeking opinion.

### **Case Study III**

The third panchayat surveyed is Jaragram located in the Jamalapur block. The gram panchayat pradhan Smt. Manoara Bibi had come into politics through her husband. All the work here is done and decided by the 'up-pradhan' (Vice-pradhan) who is a male member and more politically sound. According to the pradhan, she has to be present and preside over all the meetings and is of the opinion that the male members take decisions that are for the betterment of the people and she completely agrees with the decisions. She is quite educated and appears confident and it seems that with every passing day, she is learning the trade of the business. Moreover, apart from coming to the office daily, she also goes for frequent field visits and interacts with the people of the village and listens to their problems.

### **Observation**

The major observations derived are basically a mixture of positive and negative in terms of female empowerment. The female gram pradhans have all come to politics because of their husbands who are politically active. In some cases, they are accompanied by the husbands in their daily official activities and visits. Some villages show positive signs of women empowerment where women pradhan takes all the decisions by herself and is active in implementing the various government schemes and programmes. Whereas in other cases, some female pradhans do not have much say in the decision making process and they are completely fine with it as they feel that it is after all the male members of the panchayat who have to run from one office to another for sanctioning of fund and other paper works done at the district level which they do not think can accomplish being a woman. However, it is accepted that the presence of pradhan is a must in all Gram Panchayat meetings as they have to preside over the minutes of the meetings. Further, according to them the male 'colleagues' also have better experiences and decisions taken by them are in the interest of the public good. So, the question arises here is that whether being elected as the gram pradhan had done much difference in the social and financial status? Unfortunately, some female pradhans are less educated and marked discrimination can be observed in many cases. The problem in some places lies in the mindset of people that still runs on the fact that women are better positioned within the four walls of the house and they cannot fully accept her working with them shoulder to shoulder.

Most of the female pradhans have been serving their term and elected because of reservations or quota. What seemed positive in few areas is that even if initially the mahila pradhans were not much active in the works carried out in the Gram Panchayat (GP) level, with passing time, they are learning the business and have been actively managing the office efficiently. They also have full knowledge of the schemes which are supposedly operational in the areas. Regular interactions with the village people are also in the agenda and they are also politically conscious. Being a mahila gram pradhan has undoubtedly raised the expectations of women of the village and the pradhans do try and raise issues related to women of the villages in general even with constraints in the initial phases. Construction of toilets in every household, education for every child and providing support to women by promoting cottage industries are some of the agendas on which works are also being done. So, it is quite interesting to note that being elected as the gram pradhan has in some cases elevated the social status of the women and in some cases, not much difference is observed. In the areas surveyed under the Burdwan district, most of the female pradhans had no prior experience and have come into the foray of politics and panchayat via their husbands who are politically active.

Ensuring proper empowerment of women needs proper education and sufficient employment generating scheme.

### **Conclusion**

With 33 per cent reservation made for the women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, a healthy work environment with equal participation of men and women can be expected in the rural areas. Participation of women at the PRIs will help them get prepared for the Assembly and Parliament. Most importantly, if one woman participates in the PRIs, it will set an encouraging example for other women of the village to participate as well, will generate awareness about their rights and will eventually form a huge resource pool. It is argued that in PRIs women pradhans act more as proxy for their husbands or other male members, who are actually responsible for all the decisions taken. In rural areas, women suffer from identity crisis under the male supremacy. Lack of education, proper exposure and lack of previous political experience are some of the factors cited for the poor performance of women in politics. However, positively in some cases, women pradhans learn and adapt to different political situations while administering into the local governance. Arguments in favour of the reservation of women in PRIs state that in the village level where women usually are comparatively less educated, issues related to women are addressed far more conveniently as the women can approach their pradhan without a sense of hesitation. Moreover, women elected as the village pradhan has to spend a minimum of hours at the panchayat office that shows a positive change of women in carving their own independent identity out of the confines of the households.

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