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Women Participation in Panchayati Raj: A Case Study of Karimganj District of Assam

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Abstract

In India with the 73rd amendment Act (1992) there resulted in transition of political power to the grass-root democracy. As stated by the Balwant Raj Meheta Committee we can find that decentralization of power has led the local bodies to take active participation in all socio economic and political decisions. Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) provide the opportunity to the rural masses to involve themselves from grass-root level to achieve all the national challenges. For complete involvement of the society, participation of rural women is ensured with 33 percent women reservation. Accordingly we now find women are also elected as the member of PRIs. But it is often found that rural women lack in decision making in any aspects whether economic, social, political or family matters and are dictated by their male counterpart. Under such a situation how far rural women of Karimganj district of Assam can actively participate in grass root level democracy is studied. In Karimganj district nearly 92.67 percent of population are from rural areas and sex ratio being 961, shows clearly that women constitute a major portion of the rural population and their involvement in PRIs ensures their active participation in democracy on the one hand and development of the rural areas on the other hand. The present paper is based on primary and secondary data. By constructing awareness score and involvement score the present paper highlighted about the factors responsible for active participation of rural women of Karimganj district in PRIs.

Key words: Panchayat Raj Institutions, Rural, Women Participation, Rural development

As women constitute half of the population of a country, any development activities cannot be performed without active participation of them. It is most commonly heard that, 'women are the mother of a society and progress of a society depends upon the development of women'. If a mother is empowered, a family, and eventually an entire society are also empowered. Empowerment is not merely something one does, but an attitude. Women Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of women. It also involves developing confidence in their own capacities. All these realization that until and unless women are empowered, the progress of any economy is impossible lead to number of policies, plans, programmes and Act to empower them. Participation of women is felt essential in social, economic and political field. History reveals that the political participation of women is always there in India, but the figure is in minimum.

At present Panchayati Raj System is rolling as the grass root level democracy in India. Under this system each and every people of the rural areas can participate actively in democracy on the one hand and development of the rural areas on the other hand. However, India's oldest sacred book 'Rig Veda' mentions about the existence of 'sabhas' between villages and higher authorities, which get popularity as 'panchayats' in later period. Up to

Mughal periods it remained unchanged. The Bengal Chowkidari Act in 1870 empowered for setting up panchayat by nominating village members. The Montagu-Chemsford Reforms of 1919 brought local self-government under the domain of Indian Ministers in provinces. Article 40 of the constitution of India included village panchayats in part IV of the constitutions which contain Directive Principles of State Policy. In May 1989, the Union Govt introduced the constitution bill, which proposed constitutionally sanctioned Panchayati Raj. The Balwant Raj Mehta Committee remarked that Panchayat Raj would act as the representatives of the village and ensure the development of the village as well as participation of villages in development activities. The 73rd amendment Act (1992) is a stricken landmark in the transition of political power to the grass-root democracy in our country. Decentralization of power has led to the local bodies to take active participation in all socio economic and political decisions. PRIs provide the opportunity to the rural masses to involve themselves from grass-root level to achieve all the national challenges. For complete involvement of the society participation of rural women is now ensured with 33 percent reservation of seats for them. The entrance of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) into grassroots politics through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) election have introduced in Article 243D, 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India which provides seats reserved for SC/ST women not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved for SC/ST. These seats will be filled by direct elections not less than one-third of the total number of officers of chairpersons in panchayat at each level reserved for women (Government of India, 2010). And accordingly we find in the present Panchayati Raj Systems women are also elected.

Background of the study: Karimganj with an area of 1839 sq.km is a district in the southern part of Assam. It is situated between longitude 92°15' and 92°35' east and between 24°15' and 24°55' east latitude. Of the three districts of Barak valley, Karimganj has an international border with Bangladesh in its North West side, Tripura on its southwest, Mizoram in the south and other two districts of Barak valley Cachar and Hailakandi on the eastern side. The north and north eastern district are plain areas while south and south western parts are covered by dense forests.

Largest number of population of Karimganj i.e. 92.67 percent resides in the rural areas and their main occupation is agriculture and allied activities. Rice accounted for nearly 80 percent of the gross cultivated area. But this practice is seasonal, in other times they mainly depend on other occupations such as day labour. District has very weak economic and social infrastructure. The unemployment problem in the district is very acute due to high density of population, lack of economic opportunities and shortage of industries in the region. Total population of the district is 1228686 as per 2011 census. The sex ratio of the district is 961, higher than the state level. The rural literacy rate of the district is 76.66 percent of which female literacy is 70.11 percent.

Karimganj district has large rural areas and thus has a strong local rural self-government or Panchayat Raj Institution (PRIs) constituting of 1 Zillah Parishad, 7 Anchalik Parishads with 96 Gaon Panchayat.

With large rural population constituting of women and the strong PRIs in Karimganj district necessitates to make the present study. In this respect the present paper attempts to study how far rural women of Karimganj District are actively participating in Panchayati Raj System. Thus, the specific objective of the study is:

1. To study involvement of rural women in Panchayati Raj System.

Methodology and data base: The study is based on both primary and secondary data. To collect the primary data regarding involvement of rural women in panchayats a standard questionnaire is used. In Karimganj there are 7 Anchalik Panchayats (AP). From these 7 AP, 2 AP is purposively selected and from these 2 AP all the female elected GP presidents, AP

members and ZP members and ward members are interviewed directly. Moreover five percent of the rural women of those gaon panchayats where there is female GP president are interviewed regarding their awareness on functioning of panchayats and women empowerment.

Secondary data are collected from different official publications such as Zilla Parishad, Karimganj, Department of Statistics and Economics.

To analyse the data the simple statistical tools that is average and percentage is taken into consideration.

Review of Literature: Since 1993, when the 73rd constitution came into force with every succeeding panchayat election, women have been able to enlarge their representation beyond the minimum 33 per cent prescribed by the constitution. In order to encourage the political participation by women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, the ministry of Panchayati Raj conceptualized a scheme named Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyan (PMEYSA) and Panchayat Yuva Shakti Abhiyan (PYSA), which targets the Elected Women Representatives and elected youth representatives through Panchayat Mahila Shakti Abhiyan (PMSA), aims to build on substantial representation of women in panchayats, facilitates their collective strength of their unity and training of technological knowledge, communication and administrative skills needed for their leadership (Government of India 2010). A study made by Mahanta and Sinha (2007), has found that political workers use their strategies by influencing women members. It is in the case of Schedule Tribe and Schedule Caste, women do not file their candidature for panchayat elections out of their own choice, whereas some other factors are responsible for it like pressure of their husbands, sons, other male member of the family, village or pressure of political parties. The violence of caste war in some regions dominates the participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) elections. Societal restrictions, traditional concepts on women, women get setback in participation. Household responsibility also restricts the mobility of women. Apart from these, various women in various states of India have used their participation in the PRIs to engage in developmental work in their respective localities and bring in positive change. Women are being elected to local councils in the new Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) system in India; they are changing governance in India. It is found that 33 women respondents were elected in the 2001 in PRI in Jammu Province.

Women want to work for the society, express and raise their points and views in the panchayat meetings. But very often they fail to do so. As found by Kaul and Sahni (2009), sometime some factors like their inability in motivating their colleagues, frustration of not being heard may discourage their participation. They also sometime unable to take decision in the meeting because of shyness, unaware about the agenda and the belief of only male can take right decision.

Again in Jorhat district of Assam the performance of women in participation of panchayati raj is remarkable. As found by Phukan (2010) in his study that there is an active participation of women members of Jorhat Zilla Parishad (JZP). Majority of women attend the meeting conducted by JZP. Those who cannot attend meetings are only for domestic work. Women always raise their voice in discussion, talk on issues like water supply, medical facility, educational and training, agriculture, different women issues etc. But they are unable to take any decision due to numeral strength. According to Kalita (2012), the participation in politics is slightly increasing in Goalpara districts of Assam but not up to a satisfaction level.

Empowerment of women through political participation helps in getting idea about women's socio-economic status as well as the involvement in electoral process at local bodies, because the participation of women in political ground is utmost necessity in present days. Factors like sexual division of labour, exclusion of women from certain positions and level of power, poor representation in decision making etc keep away women participation in

politics. Some other causes for low participation includes poor educational level, less support from guardian, shyness, family and society.

The participation of rural women in Panchayati raj in Karimganj district of Assam is also found similar to that of the status of the women in other parts of India. Due to the sake of reservation it was found that the women just go for participation either dictated by their male counterpart who is her husband, brother or father etc. The male counterparts do all the functioning of the gram panchayat in the name of the female elected member. The elected female members of the gaon panchyats seldom goes for gram sabha meeting and if they participate in the meeting they have no say. The detail of the findings from the study area is discussed as below.

In Karimganj district in the three tier system of gram panchyats we have in total 960 ward members, 96 gaon panchayat presidents (GP), 7 numbers of anchalik panchayat president (AP) and 20 numbers of zilla parishad (ZPC) members. That is in total we have 1083 of representatives in the three tier system of panchayat raj institutions. Amongst these elected members a good number of female representatives are also there. The president of Zilla Parishad of Karimganj district is also female. The active participation of female elected members in gaon panchayats is considered taking the awareness score and involvement score of the female elected members in the different activity under the three tier system of PRIs.

For ensuring active participation in any activity one must have complete knowledge. Unless and until one is aware of his/ her rights they cannot practice the same. Thus, for ensuring participation of women in the grass root level democracy of course requires first of all the awareness of the women regarding their role in the panchayats. The awareness score of the rural women regarding three tier systems of panchayats as found is shown in table 1. The awareness score is calculated with a range of 0 to 1, where 0 indicates completely unaware and 1 indicates complete awareness. It is found that the awareness score of the rural elected female members regarding the structure and functioning of panchyats and regarding women rights and women empowerment is 0.34 whereas when asked the same to the rural women in general it is found to be 0.16. This implies that both the women who are the general rural women and who are elected as panchayat members keeps very less information regarding the structure and functioning of PRIs and even regarding their rights and empowerment. However, amongst the elected members of the PRIs, the elected members of ZPC is found to be more aware than the ward members, GP president or AP member. It is found that the total awareness score of the ZP member is 0.67, while next is AP member of 0.29 followed by GP president (0.24) and ward members (0.16). As we have taken 1 to be complete awareness score and 0 to be complete unawareness, then it is found that none of the members even have a moderate level of consciousness. This poor level of awareness is due to the existing illiteracy among the rural women, secondly, they are also politically illiterate and thus are not politically conscious; thirdly, they are dependent on their male counterpart and thus, finds no need of gathering knowledge or have no queries too. In such a stand where complete awareness is far behind, to ensure complete involvement from the female participation in panchayats is a far behind dream.

Again to find the active participation of rural women in PRIs, involvement score is calculated on percentage basis. The calculated involvement score is shown in the following table 2. It is found that most of the rural women participate in the PRIs since the seat is reserved for women. The participation as ward member, GP President and ZPC is hundred percent for women reservation. While talking with the elected female members it was found that earlier in these seats their male counterpart either husband, father, brother or uncle was elected and now since it is reserved so they are participating now. It has two interpretations, firstly, since the seat is being reserved for women now, at least they could come out of their domestic bindings and participate which secondly widens the path for women

empowerment. Though complete participation without the seat is reserved is still to be achieved. The women now who has been elected can enjoy the joy of treating equality in respect of participating in PRIs and thus participating in grass root level democracy as well find her status. However, it is also found that the participation in the PRIs is mostly influenced by their male counterpart. Only 16.25 percent of the women have given view regarding the self-motivation behind participation in PRIs. Again if it is fragmented in three tiers then it can be seen from table 2 that none of elected female in zilla parishad was self-motivated and only 20 percent of them who are elected as ward member and AP member are self-motivated. As we know ZPC lies at the top of the three tier system of PRIs, and at that top level the female elected members are dictated by the male counterpart. After being elected these female members though participate in the gram sabha meetings but seldom speak in the meeting and take decisions. Lack of confidence level may restrict them to raise their voice in meeting. It can be seen from the table 2 that 83 percent of women participate in the gram sabha meeting but only 52 percent of them speak whereas only 30 percent of them take decisions. It is also found that the percentage of speaking in the meeting and taking decisions is highest among the GP member and ZP member.

Thus it is found that due to sake of 33 percent reservation we are having rural women mostly participating in the panchayats or in the grass root level democracy. It is no doubt a good sign at least on the one hand that they are getting an equal treatment in respect of filling nomination for the seats in grass root level democracy. On the other hand this participation is ensuring women empowerment, as we have found that a good number of women are self-motivated to participate in the panchayat elections, and a good number of them use to speak and take decisions in the meeting of gram sabha. Though it is also found that this participation are coming from the top tier of the PRIs. It is also found that those female members who are elected as ZP member are more educated than that of the GP president or ward member. Higher is the educational level higher comes the participation rate. Again another thing to be mentioned here that the ZP member who are motivated to participate by their male counterpart, once being elected are efficiently managing their duties as they are participating in the meeting as well also taking decisions. This is no doubt a positive sign of women empowerment and active participation of women in grass root level democracy.

Conclusion: In the conclusion it can be said that though complete active participation of women is yet to be achieved in grass root level democracy but still it cannot be ignored that the rural women of this era are becoming now more active in their duties outside their home. Despite of performing their domestic duties they are also contributing to the development of their village as well the nation through participating in the panchayats. However, it is to be noted that in order to bring all the women force in the mainstream of development they should be more conscious of their rights as well the benefits that they can enjoy which are meant for them. They must be more politically conscious to ensure their complete participation in democracy. Thus, these huge human forces which are women have to be made more aware and of course education can play here a significant role. By organizing camps, programmes in television, radio the government as well the NGOs can come forward to make the rural women enlighten about their rights, about the framework of panchayats and other institutions so that there comes cent percent active participation of rural women in democracy. This will no doubt make the dream of our country to have an inclusive growth all round. When the rural women will be good enough to understand their need in participation in democracy and confidence enough to take their own decision hope reservation may not be required to bring the women participation in democracy.

Heads	Elected Female Members					Rural Women (Voters)
	Ward Members	GP President	AP Member	ZP Member	Total	
Knows about three tier system of Panchayats	0.11	0.23	0.22	0.49	0.26	0.20
Knows about the name of their constituency	0.20	0.30	0.50	1	0.50	0.10
Knows about the name or number of their ward/GP/AP/ZP	0.20	0.33	0.40	0.89	0.46	0.12
Knows about their development Block	0.10	0.11	0.33	0.89	.36	0.10
Knows about their ZPC	0.10	0.12	0.20	0.89	0.33	0.11
Knows about the functioning of PRI	0.12	0.14	0.10	0.20	0.14	0.11
Knows about 33 percent reservation in Panchyats for women	0.36	0.32	0.24	0.44	0.34	0.16
Knows about Women Empowerment	0.10	0.33	0.34	0.54	0.33	0.17
Total	0.16	0.24	0.29	0.67	0.34	0.16

Heads		Ward member	GP President	AP Member	ZP member	Total
Participation in PRIs Influenced by	Self	20	25	20	0	16.25
	Male Counterpart	60	75	60	67	65.50
	Others	20	0	20	33	18.25
Participated since the seat is reserved for women		100	100	60	100	91
Participate in Gram Sabha		80	100	60	100	83
Speak in Gram Sabha		30	100	20	100	52
Take Decision in Gram Sabha		100	60	0	100	30

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