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Role of panchayati raj institution's in ensuring gender equality in Assam

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Abstract

In the history of human development women are as important as man. In fact, the status, performance and work of women are the indicators of the progress of a nation. Without the participation of women the social, political and economic progress of a country will be stagnant. The women in Assam are also custodians of traditional knowledge which is important for communities' livelihood, resilience and culture. Yet women in rural areas of Assam are still lagging behind man in all areas of social life. They are facing problems of gender based discrimination and social norms, disproportionate involvement in unpaid work and unequal access to education, healthcare, property and financial and other services. In this paper we will try to highlight the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in ensuring of gender equality in Assam.

Keywords: Gender, empowerment, panchati raj, decentralization, development etc.

Introduction

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI's) in India is the important milestone towards the decentralization of power. It has made provisions of democratic participation and self-governance for the citizens of the country. In this regard the 73rd and 74th Constitution amendment is an epoch making development since independence. This amendment has given the PRI's a uniform constitutional structure for the entire country by inserting new parts i.e. Part- IX and Part-IX-A. Part-IX is related to PRI's containing Articles from 243 to 243 (O) which make the PRI a uniform three tier institution with constitutionally entrusted powers and responsibilities as a self-governing institution. The Part-X (A) is related to Municipalities in the country. The PRI's provides the mechanism for participation in the political administrative decision making process for the rural masses in India in general, the women in particular as it contains special provision for reservation of seats for women at all levels. Here in this paper we will try to highlight the role of the PRI's in ensuring gender equality with special reference to Assam.

Objectives of the study

- To discuss the various aspects of gender equality in Assam.
- To highlight the role of PRI's towards ensuring gender equality.
- To suggest measures to ensure gender equality through PRI's in Assam.

Methodology of study

The methodology of the study is descriptive and empirical analysis based on secondary data. For the study different published books, research articles available in the different online platforms are consulted. Apart from that the data used in the study are collected from different Government websites available in the internet.

Review of Literature

Gender Equality and Women empowerment is very widely discussed by the academicians. Gender Equity broadly refers to the process of allocating resources, programs and decision making fairly to all genders without any discrimination on the basis of gender, and addressing imbalances in the benefits available to people of different genders. Empowerment is the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people.

This enables them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority. It is the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's right. Empowerment as action refers both to the process of self-empowerment and to professional support of people, which enables them to overcome their sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, and to recognize and use their resources. Thus, empowerment is the way through which the goal of gender equality can be achieved.

Globally the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity, places gender equity and the empowerment of women and girls at the heart of its implementation. It stresses to transform the lives of women and girls and to ensure progress towards sustainable development in all dimensions: economic, social and environmental. Sustainable development can only be achieved through when every individual is equally empowered to contribute to the develop process. Thus gender inequity is a hindrance to achieve sustainable development. Dr. Ruma Bordoloi, very rightly stated that if women of this country are to be empowered to play a valuable role in shaping our destiny, then it must be ensured that their rights are properly honoured, protected and they are not treated as inferior or subordinate human beings or as 'second sex' (The Assam Tribune, 7th March, 2023 "Gender equality: The Indian perspective", p.6). Droupadi Murmu, the President of India, in her speech on Constitution Day expressed that "the world will be a lot better place if women are made equal stakeholders in the progress of humanity". She firmly advocated the need of changing the social mindset (The Assam Tribune, March 9th, 2023, why I am hopeful about gender justice, p.6).

Regarding role of the PRI's towards gender equality and women empowerment the scholars have raised many issues. In a popular article available in Google platform, it is expressed that in order to promote gender equality, 3As model is significant for Panchayats. First A is for autonomy in the field of taking decisions about women and their lives by their own. Second A is for assets, encouraging joint registration of property, land rights, access to credit, improved access to livelihood, etc. Third A is for ageing. It refers to addressing unwantedness of girls by changing attitudes that boys can provide old age support. This article focused on challenging discriminatory norms and practices, addressing unwantedness of girls and gender biased sex selection, addressing child marriage, addressing harmful practices like witch hunting, improving women's access to livelihoods etc.

(https://gdpd.nic.in/PPC/downloadFile.html?id=351&OWASP_CSRFTOKEN=K9RS-0260-2C2A-MGM4-EYNF-98K3-2J237SV7).

In a similar article published in the Google platform it is stated that the creation of women friendly PRI's needs multi-dimensional approach. It opined that the chief objective of the PRI's in the country is to establish a society where women are equal partners in development, women and girls live with dignity, realize their dreams and pursue their aspirations and women have the autonomy to make decisions about themselves and their lives and where women and girls have access to ownership of assets and coverage through the social protection schemes.

(<https://www.panchayat.gov.in/documents/448457/0/UNFP+A+Endengeing+Development+Ms.+Anuja+Gulati.pdf/5be5e534-0bdc-2690-a978-9cb8725b16f7?t=1650367853830>).

P. Sindhuja and K. R. Murugan (2017) ^[6] recommends that the local government should ensure such an environment where women are treated fairly and equally and to make sure that discrimination against women is not acceptable. Local government needs to take a gender-balanced approach and ensure that women are in decision-making positions in governance and management roles, and women's issues are promoted in policy and service provision. (<https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2034&context=jiws>).

From the survey of the literatures published in various platforms it is understood that gender equity is multi-dimensional issue. It needs a holistic approach involving social, political and economic empowerment of women. To achieve the goal of gender equity in rural India in general, Assam in particular the PRI's can play a very important role. In fact one of the basic objectives of constitution of the PRI's is to empower the women in the rural India.

Statement of the Problem

It is noteworthy that like in other parts of the world the human capital of women are undervalued and underutilized in India in general and Assam in particular. Since women are constituted almost half of the population, due to the gender gap in different aspects of society, their potential contributions to economic advances and social progress of the country have been marginalized. Various Government reports i.e. Census, NITI AYOJ etc. shows that there is a huge gap in terms of gender in different aspects of socio-economic life of the society in Assam. As per the census report of 2011, the literacy rate in Assam is 72.19%. The urban literacy rate in the state is 88.47% and the rural literacy rate is 69.34%. It shows that more people in the rural areas of the state are illiterate. At the same time the census report shows the gender gap in case of literacy in the state. The census data regarding the male and female literacy are as follows.

Table 1: Population distribution by gender across geographic areas.

State/Rural/Urban	Male	Female	Gender Gap
State	77.85%	66.27%	11.58%
Rural	75.4%	63%	12.4%
Urban	91.8%	84.9%	6.9%

The above census data shows that in the state literacy rate a large percentage of female in the state are illiterate as compared to the male. The census data also showed that in the female illiteracy rate is more in the rural areas than the urban areas.

As per the data available in the website, the female labor force participation rate (FLFP) in Assam is lower than the national average. In 2020-21, the FLFP rate in rural Assam was 18.9%, while in urban Assam it was 16%. In rural areas, most employed women are working in agriculture. (https://www.google.com/search?q=work+participation+of+women+in+Assam&rlz=1C1GCEB_enIN1086IN1086&oq=work+participation+of+women+in+Assam&aqs=chrome..69i57.11115j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 viewed on 25/1/2025).

As per the census data given by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Transformation and Development, Government of Assam, in 2011, Assam has a population of 312.05 lakh of which 159.39 lakh were male and 152.66 lakh were female. Out of total population 86% (268.07 app.) populations lived in rural areas.

(<https://des.assam.gov.in/information-services/state-profile-of-assam> on 25/1/2025) It means more women are living in the rural areas and to ensure gender equality in Assam special measures to be taken in the rural areas. Thus, the PRI's has an important role in ensuring gender equality as well as development of women in Assam. Better use of the potentiality of women could increase economic growth, reduce poverty and help to ensure sustainable development the State.

Panchayati Raj Institutions in Assam

Assam is a pioneer state in the country to establish the Panchayati Raj Institutions since Independence. It was in 1948, The Assam Rural Panchayat Act, 1948 was enacted to constitute the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the State. Further the Act was amended and replaced by the Assam Panchayat Act, 1959, the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1972, the Assam Panchayati Raj Act, 1986 and finally the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 which incorporated the provisions of the 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 of the Constitution of India. It is noteworthy that the 73rd Constitution amendment Act gives the constitutional status to the PRI's. This amendment inserted Part IX and Articles from 243 to 243-O which states the composition powers and functions of the Panchayat. This amendment also clearly demarcated the jurisdiction of the Panchayat by inserting 11th Schedule in the Constitution where the subjects to be governed by the Panchayats were mentioned. But the most important feature of the 73rd Constitution amendment Act was, perhaps for the first time in the history of the constitutional development in the country, provisions were made for reservation of seats for women in all the three tiers of the PRI's i.e. Zila Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat and Gaon Panchayats. Following these provisions, the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994 also made the provision for 33% seats to be reserved for women in all the three tiers of the PRI's. Further in 2011, the Government of Assam had increased the reservation for women to 50% in PRI's. Like in other parts of the country thus, the PRI's in Assam empowers the women by giving them the political power. At present the number of PRI's in the State are as follows.

Table 2: Local governance structure with three administrative levels.

Zila Parishad	21
Anchalik Panchayat	185
Gaon Panchayat	2202

Table 3: The total numbers of elected representatives in different levels of PRIS' in Assam are as follows

Panchayat	Representatives	Chairpersons
Zila Parishad	420	21
Anchalik Panchayat	2201	185
Gaon Panchayat	24222	2201

Significance of women participation in the PRI's in Assam

The PRI's plays an important role in ensuring gender equality by empowering women in rural areas of Assam.

The significance of women's participation in the PRI's are as follows.

Decision making power: The great significance of the PRI's not only in Assam but in entire country is that it gives the decision making power to women. It provides opportunity for the direct representation in the rural governance. Through the PRI's women can take the policy decision for their upliftment. It is noteworthy that although India is a democratic country the women representation in the decision making bodies are very less in Assam. Even the elected women representatives in the Legislative bodies in the country are basically belong to the upper class of the society. An ordinary woman from rural area cannot be getting elected as the Member of Legislative Assemblies or Member of Parliament in the country. Moreover the PRI's decentralized the Government system into the village level. Through the PRI's the women in Assam can address the issues for the greater interest of the society.

Capacity Building: The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) aims to empower women by improving their leadership skills. Through the direct participation women can understand their roles and responsibilities in the governance process. The PRI's helps women to develop leadership skills. It also empowers them to become vocal for their rights. The PRI's helps women set their own agenda. The PRI's gives opportunity to women to mobilize their community for their upliftment.

Effective implementation of welfare programmes: For the success of the welfare programmes the involvement of the target population in the project implementation is necessary. There are multiple programmes and schemes of the Central as well as State Government undertaken for the empowerment of women which are executed by the PRI's. Women's participation in such rural development programmes and schemes can help achieve sustainable development by improving the quality of life for women as well as of the communities. Like in other States of India, in Assam also women are often key players in the rural economy. Their participation in decision making body can help to secure food security, generate income, and reduce poverty in Assam.

Improve social standing: Women's participation in rural projects can help to improve their social standing in the community. They can also help to improve the overall well-being of their families and communities.

Entrepreneurship development: In Assam, women plays important role in the rural economy as farmers, wage earners along with the responsibility of well-being of the children and the family as a whole. In rural areas of Assam women are often the primary producers of food. They are involved in the farming practices, livestock breeding and weaving. The Central and State Government have executed various entrepreneurship development programmes in rural areas through the Rural Livelihood Mission. For example, financial aid is providing to women self-help groups as a part of entrepreneurship development programmes. The PRI's are the implementing agency of such programmes. Participation of women in the PRI's makes women aware about such programmes. In some villages of Assam women

are successfully running small scale business through the self-help groups with the support of such schemes. This has improved their livelihood as well as helps in reduction of poverty in the State.

From the above analysis it is clear that women participation in the PRI's is very significant so far as gender equity in Assam is concerned. Effective participation in PRI's will empower women in many ways and will improve their livelihood in Assam. At the same time there are multiple challenges also in the effective participation of women in the PRI's in Assam. Some of them are mentioned in the following.

Challenges of Effective participation of Women in PRI's

Lack of Awareness: For the effective participation of women in the PRI's political awareness of women is very essential. They must be aware about the constitutional provisions and actual functioning of the PRI's in Assam. But due to illiteracy and lack of proper education among the rural women of Assam they are lacking sufficient knowledge and consciousness about leadership. In most cases women are not politically aware about the PRI's. In such cases though they are getting elected to the PRI's yet they are dominated by the male members of the PRI's. Even they don't know about the powers and functions of the PRI's.

Patriarchy: Assam is having a predominantly patriarchic family as well as social system. As a result everywhere in the society there is male domination. Although women are giving political power in the PRI's in actual practice such powers are exercising by a male person indirectly in different ways. It is observed that the male members in the PRI are dominating over the female members during the implementation of the programmes. It is also observed that the husband of the elected women intervene in her functioning in welfare activities of the Panchayat. In most cases the actual decisions are being taken by their male partners of her family.

Negative Perception regarding Women's Leadership

In rural areas the people of Assam are yet to accept the leadership capability of women. In the rural family women is facing lack of support from the family members to contest in elections of PRI's. Rather they prefer government job for an educated women. Therefore at the grassroots level, there is dearth of young educated women leaders to lead the PRI's.

Male Dominated Party Politics: Although the actual philosophy is the PRI's should be free from the normal state or national politics but in actual practice the PRIs are becoming the power center to recruit the local party workers of the political parties. The PRI's are not free from the interference of the party leaders. The Panchayat elections are dominated by the party politics. All the political parties are led by the male political leaders; the elected Panchayat members are guided and controlled by the male party leaders. Thus elected women of the PRI's are not enjoying the actual freedom in decision making of the PRI's.

Some Suggestions

The PRI's are considered as an instrument of good governance. The PRI's that as grass root units of

decentralized democratic self-government have been considered as an instrument of socio-economic transformation of rural India. Since women constitute half of the population of Indian society the empowerment of women for participation in the political decision making process is always considered as crucial need to develop India. In this direction the participation of women in the PRI's through reservation is very important since the PRI's are very close to the rural society of India. In Assam, 50% reservation of seats for women in all the levels of the PRI's is a very praiseworthy decision to ensure gender equality in the state. But merely reservation of seats without an effective leadership from women brings no result to ensure gender equality in the state. For effective participation of women in the PRI's to ensure gender equality in the state following steps can help to achieve the desired goals.

- a) The first and foremost need is the awareness of rural women regarding PRI's for the effective leadership of women. In this regard literacy plays an important role to educate women regarding their new role as a local legislator and governance. Hence, special thrust should be given to enhance the female literacy particularly in rural Assam as well as in Assam.
- b) Measures should be taken to attract more and more women to contest in the PRI elections. At the same time all women should be motivated to cast their vote at least in the PRI elections.
- c) To enhance the role of the women in social development through PRI's, it is essential that the elected members as well as the women voters should be aware about the functioning of PRIs and various Government schemes for rural development. Hence special measures to be taken to aware the women in rural areas about various government schemes.
- d) It should be ensured that the elected women members of the PRI's should be literate so that they can guide and tell the people about the various welfare schemes and can monitor the implementation of the same. In this regard the minimum educational qualification for the candidates to contest in the PRI's should be fixed by the appropriate legislation.
- e) There is need of enhancing leadership and communication skills of the elected women so that they can motivate the other women in the rural areas to take active part in the functioning of the PRI's for their upliftment.
- f) It is desired that the PRI' should be free from party politics. Educated peoples of the villages should be encouraged to contest in the elections. Women are not willing to contest in elections because of the highly competitive party politics.
- g) It is important to break the cultural barriers for the women to improve their socio-economic condition. They should not be confined within the household works. There is a need to change the perception of the people regarding the capabilities of women. They should be encouraged to take the leadership responsibility for the development of the society.
- h) In a digital era, it is important that women must be accustomed with the modern technology in their day to day life. In the context of Digital India, women representatives of the PRI's should also be actively involved in utilizing the technology for their own self and village development.

Conclusion

The Panchayati Raj Institutions can play a very important role in promoting gender equality in the India in general and Assam in particular through providing opportunity for direct representation by reservation of seats for women. Through the political representation they can influence the decision making process as well as its implementation in the key areas like health, education and entrepreneurship development for the benefit of women at the grass root level. In Assam, the participation of women in such decision making process is important because of prevalent gender gap in the key areas of social development. The State government should delegate more powers and resources to the PRI have to reduce gender gap, thereby contributing to a more equitable society in Assam.

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