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Political participation of women in gram panchayat election in Odisha: A case study of Tihidi block in Bhadrak district

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Abstract

The present study on political participation and empowerment of women is an endeavour to learn in the Panchayati Raj Institution. PRIs have long been considered for promoting good governance, and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was introduced to ensure better governance and political representation for marginalised societies, including the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, as well as women. This study investigates 120 women respondents from four Gram Panchayats in the Tihidi block of Bhadrak district, Odisha. The study's findings suggest that the level of political participation by women in panchayats is unsatisfactory. Some of the respondents are not aware of the politics. The parochial culture, low level of education, and patriarchal society are primarily responsible for their backwardness.

Keywords: Panchayati Raj institutions, political participation, women empowerment, electoral process

Introduction

A performing democracy needs involved citizens for its strength and vibrancy. Indeed, such a democratic polity cannot overlook women, who are half of such a society. Their involvement in resolving local issues is a crucial component for enhancing democratic governance. However, patriarchal social norms in developing countries, particularly in South Asia, pose significant challenges for their participation in the 'public space'. A patriarchal society creates innumerable roadblocks in diverse ways to wipe out the determination of a woman. Therefore, after India's independence, the Parliament introduced significant changes to the Constitution in 1992 to create an 'invited space' for women to participate in electoral politics. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts reserved one-third of the seats in urban and local bodies for women. Around 20 states have gone further by increasing this quota to 50 percent. Odisha, an eastern region state is one among them.

Political participation is the process by which women can engage in various political activities, such as voting, joining political parties, campaigning in elections, participating in discussions, and influencing government decisions through women's networks. This empirical study aims to find out the mode of rural women's participation in the electoral process.

Women's Empowerment and Political Participation

Women's empowerment and political participation are crucial components in achieving gender equality and fostering democratic governance. Women's empowerment refers to enabling them to make their own choices, providing them with the freedom and support they need, and participating in the decision-making process. In a democratic society, full participation of all citizens, including women, is required in the political process. Women's participation in politics is not only their right but also a firm and fair democracy. It helps make a more representative and better governance. Therefore, political participation is a crucial means by which women can achieve their empowerment.

Furthermore, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to eradicate poverty and ensure peace and prosperity for all, regardless of gender. It is specifically highlighted in SDG 5 that the achievement of gender equality and equal participation in all

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aspects of life by women and girls is a goal for all. Achieving gender equality is not only politically, but also socially and economically, crucial for moving forward with sustainable development, which can create a more prosperous world.

Women's Political Participation and Leadership

When women take leadership roles in politics, it often brings positive changes to society (World Economic Forum, 2017). Take steps to make sure women have equal chances to be part of decision-making leadership. Help women develop the skills they need to participate in decision-making and leadership (Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995). According to the Sustainable Development Goals report, the 2030 target is to ensure women's full participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) mentions that women's political equality (article 17). And equal participation at all levels of government, on equal terms with men (Article 7B). Women participating in politics are influential to other women in their communities. Women can be involved in politics and have positive relationships with public service and the private sector (Bari Farzana, 2005).

Political Environment for Rural Women in India

Rural women percentage. The Constitution of India has strengthened the hands of women in villages through the Fundamental Rights. The Fundamental Right (Part III, Articles 12-35) ensures equality before the law and equal protection by the laws for women (Article 14). The State is to make specific laws and policies to help women, and socially or educationally deprived groups (like the Scheduled caste and the Scheduled tribes), so that they can get equal opportunities (Article 15). Each citizen is guaranteed equality of opportunity in matters of public employment or any office under the State (Article 16).

The Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV, Articles 36-52) also outline guidelines that are non-justiciable in nature. The state shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to and adequate means of livelihood (Article 39A) and that the state ensures equal pay for equal work for both men and women without any discrimination (Article 39(d)); the state is to make provision for ensure fair and humane working conditions and provide maternity relief for women workers (Article 42).

The State is to promote the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, especially the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. It also states that it aims to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (Article 46). The State is to raise the level of dietary intake, ensuring food security and improving the living conditions of its people (Article 47). Every citizen has to promote unity and mutual understanding amongst all the Indians, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, and the need to abolish any practices that are harmful or disrespectful to women (Article 51-A (e)).

The Union Parliament has reserved some seats for women in the grassroots body. After that, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts (1992) were passed, and women's participation in PRIs was as follows:

1. Mandates that not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat be reserved for women and such seats be allotted by rotation among different constituencies within the Panchayat during elections (Article 243 D(3)).
2. The Indian Constitution mandates that not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level (village, intermediate, and district) must be reserved for women (Article 243D (4)).
3. At least one-third (including women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every municipality to be reserved for women, and these reserved seats can be rotated periodically and distributed within the city (Article 243 T (3)).
4. Reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and women in the offices of chairpersons in such manner as the legislature of a State may by law provide (Article 243 T (4)).

Local Self-Government in Odisha

In 1936, Odisha became a separate province. Odisha introduced a grassroots democratic bodies initiative in India. After independence, the Odisha government introduced the Orissa Gram Panchayat Act in 1948. Following this, the Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Act of 1959 was enacted and came into effect on 26 January 1961, in the state of Odisha. Biju Patnaik, the most dynamic chief minister of Odisha, introduced in 1990 the participation of women in the Panchayati Raj system. He announced for the first time India's women's reservation of 33 percent in three-tier PRIs, including scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women. It also goes to Biju Babu, who, after a long time, conducted panchayat elections in Odisha in 1992. The first time history was made in Odisha after independence was when more than 28,000 women were elected to the three-tier system. Now, Odisha has a three-tier system of local self-government. The first tier is the gram panchayat at the village level, the second tier is the panchayat samiti at the block level, and the third tier is the zilla parishad at the district level. Furthermore, 50% of seats are reserved for women in all three tiers. It also aims to improve efficiency and accountability among rural people.

Review of Literature

If the empowerment of women in rural areas is the primary goal of development administration, income augmentation and a social safety net are the most critical factors for achieving this goal. At the local level, women can establish a pressure group to support the development process. (Umakanta Dash, 2015) [13]. When women's conditions improve socially, economically, and politically, rural development will automatically follow. This will only be possible through leadership skill development, the strongest social and family support, and improving skills and training in rural areas. (Panda, 2015) [7]. If grassroots develop, then there is an easy way to grow at the top level. Suggested that several schemes and policies be appropriately implemented in grassroots areas. These schemes are designed to succeed in the PRIs, utilising the benefits for all women. The Indian

government focused on infrastructure development through strong service delivery at the village level. In the era of globalisation, country-to-country competition is exceptionally high in various fields, including social, economic, and technological. Nowadays, if India wants to compete on a global level, then the vital role of PRIs is the backbone of Indian democracy (Singh, 2016) ^[11]. Women are facing several challenges in the local governance system, like exploitation, discrimination, and fear of oppression. It involves that male-dominated system. To identify the major causes and barriers to the participation of women in PRIs. He justified that rural women suffer from a lack of education, inadequate awareness, and limited access to information. Rural women's empowerment can be achieved through constitutional provisions, self-awareness, governmental policies, and social action, ultimately leading to increased decision-making and greater representation in mainstream political power (Mishra, 2017) ^[5]. Women's participation in panchayats has risen significantly in the local self-governance process through the electoral system. He focused on the Maoist areas, such as the Malkangiri and Koraput districts of Odisha, concerning governmental development schemes like MGNREGA and the Backwards Regions Grant Fund through the devolution package, due to the literacy and poor economic backgrounds of the local population. Many women struggle with the decision-making process. He suggested that economic development, the rule of law, and increased participation of women in panchayat meetings increase their leadership qualities (Mohapatra, 2016) ^[6].

Objective of the study

- To examine the nature of political participation of rural

women in local politics.

- To analyse the level of political awareness of women
- To find out the political aspirations of women
- To investigate the challenges and problems faced by women in the process of political participation.

Methods of research

This study has collected both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected through personal interviews with the women respondents in the study area. The secondary data was collected from books, government documents, district handbooks, and other published journals of the panchayat raj institution, with proper procedures. I have selected only four Gram Panchayats in the Tihidi block of the Bhadrak district: Kanpada, Baro, Shyamasundarpur, and Barasar. I have chosen 120 sample respondents, 30 from each gram panchayat, and I have been selected for random sampling.

Analysis of Data

It found that 33.33% of the women in the 18- to 25-year-old age group, around 50% of the women, get married. Nearly all of the respondents belong to the Hindu religion. The total respondents belong to the following categories: 35% General, 25% OBC, and 40% SC/ST. The educational qualifications of 45.83% of women are illiterate, 33.33% of women have completed high school, and 20.83% of women are pursuing higher studies. I have observed that most women are dependent on their husbands, and many of their husbands rely on farming and daily labour. In conclusion, women are often the primary farmers and daily labourers. It was a field survey study.

Table 1: Mode of Electoral Participation (N=120)

SI. No.	Pattern of Participation	Number of saying "Yes"	Percentage (%)
1.	As a Member of a Political Party	41	34.16
2.	As a sympathiser of a Political Party, not a member	35	29.16
3.	As a campaigner	23	19.16
4.	As a Candidate	13	10.83
5.	Participants in Protest rallies, Strikes, and signatories to a petition	08	6.66

Source: Personal Interview

The above table shows the participation of women in PRIs. 34.16% of women have participated as members of a political party, 29.16% of women as supporters of a political party, and 19.16% of women have campaigned for their family members, supporters, or as party candidates. From

the above micro study, it was found that the women lack knowledge about the electoral system. They are merely an indicator in the hands of political leaders, and they know that no one abstains from their franchise.

Table 2: Level of Political Awareness of Women (N=120)

SI. No.	Questions	Yes (Percentage)	No (Percentage)	Total
1	Do You Know that the Voting Age has changed from 21 to 18?	75(62.5)	45(37.5)	120(100%)
2	Do you know that elections are conducted every five years?	109(90.83)	11(9.16)	120(100%)
3	Do you know that a citizen who is 18 years of age or older is eligible to vote in an election?	99(82.5)	21(17.5)	120(100%)
4	Do you know that there is a Gram Panchayat in your locality?	117(97.5)	03(2.5)	120(100%)
5	What is the name of your Sarpanch?	89(74.16)	31(25.83)	120(100%)
6	Do you have Knowledge about the Panchayati Raj system?	67(55.83)	53(44.16)	120(100%)
7	Do you know the Power & Works of Panchayati Raj Institutions?	67(55.83)	53(44.16)	120(100%)
8	Do you know the members of the Panchayat/Block/Zila Parishad?	73(60.83)	47(39.16)	120(100%)
9	Do you know that there is a Block Development Officer who looks after the Development of your Gram Panchayat?	56(46.66)	64(53.33)	120(100%)
10	Do you know that seats are reserved for SC/ST and Women in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zilla Parishads?	88(73.33)	32(26.66)	120(100%)

Source: Personal Interview

From the table above, it is clear that women have minimal awareness of the electoral process in the gram panchayat. They have very little knowledge about the voting age, the provision of political rights, the election period, and the

reservation of seats for elected women in the gram panchayat. It was found that, long after India's independence, through the democratic system, women have little awareness of the country.

Table 3: Problems faced by women with administration

Support from the Government Officials(N=120)		Cause of the Problem Faced(N=63)			
Yes	No	Corruption	Harass Language	Discourage language	Never Dealt with Officials
57(47.5)	63(52.5)	29(46.03)	06(9.52)	04(6.34)	24(38.09)

Source: Personal Interview

The above table indicates that 57 (47%) of women are supported by the government and administration, whereas the government administration does not support 63 (52.5%) respondents. I questioned why the government and administration do not support you. They answer that the

corruption level is very high and officers have never dealt with problems. In this table, 24 (46.03%) respondents attributed the issue to corruption, 6 (9.52%) to harassing language by officials, and 4 (6.34%) to discouraging language by officials.

Table 4: Interaction between women and the gram panchayat (N=120)

SI. No.	Questions	Regularly (%)	Sometimes (%)	Never (%)
1.	Do the gram panchayat members meet you?	22(18.33)	34(28.33)	64(53.33)
2.	Do you attend the Gram Sabha meetings?	07(5.83)	15(12.5)	98(81.66)
3.	Do you attend the Polli Sabha meeting?	18(15)	27(22.5)	75(62.5)
4.	Do you think that the gram panchayat always fulfils your demands?	23(19.16)	41(34.16)	57(47.5)

Source: Personal Interview

The table above shows that women have very low participation rates in the panchayat raj process and are less satisfied with their participation in the Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha.

Challenges faced by women representatives

The parochial culture, the law, the level of education, and the patriarchal society are some reasons for the poor involvement of panchayat development programmes. The women representatives from the study mention that they cannot make political decisions independently. They reported that all the decisions are made by their spouses and other family members, even during panchayat meetings. It means women are elected as leaders, but they do not have real political power. During the personal interview, one of the respondents shared that "I was elected as a political representative in the last election, I take part in political work, but before taking any decision, I always consult my husband. He tells me not to decide anything on my own. He says people from the opposite party might create problems for me, so I should be very careful". The decisions are guided mainly by the male members of the community. Many people believe that women are more emotional than men, so they think women are not fit to make political decisions.

Findings

From the above data, the identified disadvantages faced by women due to their low level of participation in the electoral process are

- Several challenges women face in the local self-governance system. There is a lack of women's education, patriarchal families, and access to information.
- Lack of proper awareness is the major challenge regarding their power and responsibility in participating in Panchayat Raj Institutions.
- I have found in my survey that socio-economic

conditions are directly affected by their involvement in panchayat elections because they belong to poor families, they regularly think about their daily livelihood, and there is no time to consider politics.

- They have very little knowledge about participating in elections, such as the voting age, the reservation of seats for women, and the election period.

Conclusion

However, women members should be educated and gain knowledge of politics, their rights, the nature of the rule of law, programs and policies for women, and the advantages of other members of society, as well as voting rights, to mobilize women and help address political dilemmas. Elected representatives are likely to create a capable environment for the local community, participate in Gram Sabha meetings, ask questions, and express their own opinions. According to the Ministry of Panchayat Raj, the reality is that low levels of attendance and participation by women in Gram Sabha meetings, as well as the low number of elected women representatives, resulted in low levels of mobilization. The report showed that 63% of elected women, less than one-fourth of women, participated in the Gram Sabha meeting. This was mainly low participation in Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Goa, but high in West Bengal, Karnataka, Tripura, and Assam.

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