

# Political Empowerment of Women in Gram Panchayat A Study of Cooch Behar District of West Bengal, India

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## Abstract

The present study on “Political Empowerment of Women in Gram Panchayat– A Study of Cooch Behar District of West Bengal, India” is an attempt to analyse the present position of participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and how political empowerment correlated with economic and social empowerment. The PRIs introduced proper representation and proper participation from all marginalized section of society, specially the participation of women who are belonging to weaker sections of the society because women in Panchayats constitute the basic components of democracy. This democracy achieved complete active participation of women in grassroot level politics which means the reconstruction of India from the below, but the journey of political participation of women is not smooth, they face a various problems in the village Panchayat. The primary objective of the study is to find out different constraints of women empowerment and suggest action formulated measures in this direction. This study finds out whether reservation of seats for women at local level helped them towards empowerment and decision-making capacity. The study indicates that the area is a part of the state of West Bengal and the study here focuses on the issue of women empowerment through political participation in Gram Panchayat level and concentrates in the role and performance of women in Gram Panchayat. It aims at highlighting the participation of women in politics in Gram Panchayat as a tool of their empowerment.

**Keywords:** Women, Empowerment, Political Participation, Gram Panchayat, Democracy, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Marginalised.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women constitute “half of the sky” in the universe. But it is true and very unfortunate that the women suffered inferior position to men almost all section of the societies in the world. So, empowering of women is an important issue for the all-round development of a nation. The empowerment of women means women to be economically, socially and politically independent, self-reliant, positive self-esteem and to able them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in the process of decision making system. Empowerment does not mean only setting women against men. Empowerment mean making both men and women realise their roles and status and develop a consensus for harmonious living in the context of an equal society. It means redistribution of work roles, redistribution of values to the changing world and evolving new kinds of coordination, trust and understanding with each other. The concept of women empowerment is a multidimensional process it is



particularly not possible to include all the dimensions in the single study. It is true that the active participation of women in the decision-making and their empowerment in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in the past two decades of 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment undoubtedly changed. The reservation of seats in the grassroots democratic institutions for women has created some opportunities for participating in the decision-making process but it is not the only way to make them wholly empowered. Women empowerment will be possible if women are able to make decisions in every spheres of their life i.e. economic, social, political, psychological etc.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is mostly based on empirical methods. I conducted personal interviews with the women respondents in my selected areas. The data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are like questionnaire, interviews and observations. Secondary sources are like library, various offices newspapers, articles, journals, existing research thesis, books, governmental report, internet etc. were used. There are in all five sub-divisions in Cooch Behar district, for the purpose of the study Dinhata sub-division was selected and Dinhata sub-division consist three community development block, the present study work Dinhata block – I. The study has been conducted in 7 Gram Panchayat of Dinhata – I Block of Cooch Behar District of West Bengal and the total respondent are 97 which including both male and female representatives.

**Table: 1 selected block in Cooch Behar district**

DISTRICT	SUB-DIVISION	BLOCK	GRAM PANCHAYAT
Cooch Behar	Dinhata	Dinhata-I	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bara Atiabari – I</li> <li>2. Bara Atiabari – II</li> <li>3. Bara Soulmari</li> <li>4. Bhetaguri – I</li> <li>5. Dinhata Village – II</li> <li>6. Petla</li> <li>7. Putimari – I</li> </ol>

## 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To find out whether the reservation of seats for women at Panchayat level in West Bengal has really improvement in the decision-making capacity of rural women.
2. To evaluate the socio-economic and political condition of women.
3. To prove the political awareness, political knowledge, political interest and political role of the women within the selected area.
4. To find out the performance of women in decision making and how far the women are aware of their rights.

## 4. LITERATURES REVIEW

Billava, N. & Nayak, S. N. (2016), in their study '*Empowerment of Women representative in Panchayati Raj Institutions: thematic review*' has described local self-government are viewed as solution to all the problems of rural development and is linked to empowerment of the marginalised section of



society, especially women. This study highlighted a thematic review on the empowerment of women representative in Panchayati Raj Institutions with special reference to decentralisation process and the 73<sup>rd</sup> constitutional amendment in India covering the level of consciousness among representative about Panchayat functioning, participation in community activities, capacity to take self-decision, changes in their socio-economic condition, decision making power at Panchayat level and their political participation.

**Gadam, R. (2019)**, in this study '*Women Empowerment through Political Participation and the Role of Panchayati Raj Institution*' has highlighted that the reviewing the situation of women participation and representation of local government and also take step and insight into hurdles exist for women empowerment through PRIs. He discussed women needed to participate in politics because they enhance the policies that trace their socio economic condition and empowerment go hand and hand.

**Geeta, M. & Mishra, S. (2017)**, in their article '*Panchayati Raj Institutions and Empowerment of Women*': problems and challenges, they emphasized the development of reservations for the weaker sections in Panchayati Raj Institutions and especially women in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional amendment. This study has been cited to understand the impact of constitutional amendment on the empowerment of women. This article has emphasized there are many challenges and issues such as entrenched mind set of patriarchal system rigid caste discrimination in the rural areas. They analysed causes massive female illiteracy and female Independence on male have ensured that power are still in the hand of males. Even they also emphasized the causes responsible for success and failure to participation of politics of the women in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

**Xaxa, J. (2013)**, in her study '*Empowerment of Women in Panchayati Raj System: A study in Orissa*', she observed the constitution of India has provided equality of men and women but family status in Indian context is judged on account of male priority. This study is actively focused on the women empowerment in Orissa, through the Local Government and particularly through the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment which has awakened up procedure of what actually our policy maker wanted.

**Singh, S. (2016)**, in his study '*Empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural area in Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh: An empirical investigation*', he highlighted the women empowerment through political participation in local Government in Seraj Development Block of Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh. He highlighted socio-economic condition of the women respondents and also highlighted the situation of women representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

**Rawat, D. & Sauni, P. (2017)**, in their work '*A micro study of the Level of Empowerment and knowledge of Elected Women Gram Pradhans in Agra District*' has described spheres of women empowerment such as political, social and economic and for the foundation of gender equal society. This work mainly highlighted working knowledge status of elected women gram pradhans in Agra District. This work also highlighted the development aspect of the village in connected to the expansion of the government funds.

## 5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Major portion of Indian people are lives in rural areas. Policy implementation in village areas is more difficult due to various reasons such as lack of awareness, knowledge, and consciousness, lack of economic stability and thereby weak personality, low rate literacy, communication problem, dominance of prejudication as well as customary law in the society and so on. However, West Bengal has been successfully implemented three-tier Panchayat System in the year 1978. This three-tier system is namely



Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samity & Zilla Parishad but the study mainly focuses “Gram Panchayat”. The Gram Panchayat is first tier of the Panchayat system at the grass root level. One Gram Panchayat consists of few Gram Sabhas. Therefore Gram Sabha is the basic unit of Gram Panchayat & one Gram Sabha is equivalent to 1 electoral role part. One Gram Panchayat consists of maximum 5 to 25 members out of which 1/3<sup>rd</sup> is reserved for women but recently West Bengal Government this policy extend 50% reserved for women.

**Table 2: Profile of the Representatives**

Block	SL No.	Gram Panchayet	Membership of Representative		Total	Male-Female Ratio in the Respondent Group	Percentage	
			Male	Female			Male	Female
Dinata-I	1	Bara Atiabari –I	6	6	12	1:1	50	50
	2	Bara Atiabari –II	6	6	12	1:1	50	50
	3	Bara Soulmari	7	7	14	1:1	50	50
	4	Bhetaguri-I	5	5	10	1:1	50	50
	5	Dinhata Village-II	7	7	14	1:1	50	50
	6	Petla	11	10	21	1.1:1	52.38	47.62
	7	Putimari-I	6	9	15	0.67:1	40	60
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>0.96:1</b>	<b>48.98</b>	<b>51.02</b>

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey

Table 2 presents women representation in gram Panchayat in Dinhata block- I of Cooch Behar District. Total elected members are 97 among female members are 50 and male members are 48.

**Table 3: Social Background**

SI No.	Caste	Sex		Religion							
				Hindu		Muslim		Christian		Others	
		Male	Female	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1.	Unreserved	07	06	03	02	04	04	00	00	00	00
2.	Scheduled Caste	24	27	24	27	00	04	00	00	00	00
3.	Scheduled Tribe	01	01	01	01	00	00	00	00	00	00
4.	Other Backward Classes	15	16	01	03	14	00	00	00	00	00
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>47</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>00</b>	<b>00</b>	<b>00</b>	<b>00</b>

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey

Table 3 shows that there are total male members 47 among them there are 07 male members are belong



to unreserved category and 24 male members schedule caste category and 01 male members are schedule tribe and 15 male members are belong to other backward classes. The total female members are 50 among them there are 06 female members are belong to unreserved section and 27 female members belong to schedule caste section and 01 female members are schedule tribes and 16 female members are belong to other backward classes. Even the table shows the religion of these members. The total male members are 47 among them 29 male members are Hindu and 18 male members are Muslim and the total female members are 50 among them 34 female members are Hindu and 17 female members are belong to Muslim family. There is no any members from the Christian and Others category.

**Table 4: Marital Status**

SI No.	Marital Status	Frequency	
		M	F
1.	Married	42	50
2.	Unmarried	05	00
TOTAL		47	50

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey

Table 4 here discusses the marital status of the male and female representatives. It indicates that the total 47 male member among which 42 male are married, that means 89.16% of them are married only 05 members are not married and all female members (50) are married. The result shows that marital status does not affect the female participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

**Table 5: Age wise distribution and interest in being involved in Politics**

SI NO.	Age Group	Frequency		Interested in further involvement in politics					
				Gram Panchayat level		State level		National level	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1.	21-30	06	14	05	05	01	01	00	00
2.	31-40	14	22	11	05	02	00	00	00
3.	41-50	19	12	13	02	01	00	00	00
4.	51-60	04	02	03	01	00	00	00	00
5.	Above 60	04	00	00	00	00	00	00	00
TOTAL		47	50	32	13	04	01	00	00

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey



The data in the table 5 indicates that representatives those are in the age group of 21 to 30 years represent 20.62% of the total sample & 37.12% of them are represented in the age group of 31 to 40 years of the total sample. The age group of 41 to 50 years represent 31.96% and the age group of 51 to 60 years represent 06.19%. There are only 04.11% representatives who belong to the age group of above 60 years. Thus middle age groups between thirty-one to fifty years have a greater participate in grass root politics. And this table also shows interested in further involvement in politics of male and female representatives and see majority of representative's not interested high level politics. It is evident from the data that majority of the representatives belong to the middle age group, and people who joined politics in very early age but not interest in greater politics.

**Table 6: Educational Background**

SI No.	Education Qualification	Frequency	
		M	F
1.	Primary	06	11
2.	Upper Primary	12	13
3.	Secondary	11	10
4.	High Secondary	05	03
5.	Graduate	10	11
6.	Post Graduate	03	02
TOTAL		47	50

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey

The analysis of the data in the table no.6 that the total male members are 47 among them 06 members are qualification of Primary level and 12 members are qualified Upper primary level and Secondary level qualification are 11 members and Graduate and Post Graduate members are 10 and 03 and the total female members are 50 among them 11 female members are belong to Primary level education and 13 members are belong to Upper Primary section and the Secondary and High Secondary qualification are 10 and 03 members. Graduate and Post Graduate female members are 11 and 02. And this table also shows educational level as well participation in Panchayat and shows their capacities of Gram Panchayat level functions.

**Table 7: Occupational Status**

SI N o.	Occupatio n	Frequency		Tot al	Monthly income					
		M	F		Below 5000/-		Below 7000/-		Above 7000/-	
					M	F	M	F	M	F
1.	Agricultur e	17	15	32	17	15	00	00	00	00
2.	Daily Labour	01	00	01	01	00	00	00	00	00



3.	Business	14	02	16	00	00	06	02	08	00
4.	Service	06	02	08	00	00	00	00	06	02
5.	Other	09	31	40	09	31	00	00	00	00
TOTAL		47	50	97	27	46	06	02	14	02

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey

The table 7 shows that total 32.99% members occupation are agriculture, among which male members is 17.52% & female members is 15.46%. The percentage of daily labour persons is 01.50. Among this segment no women is there. The total businessman is 16.5% , among them the male members is 14.43% and female member is 02.06% and the total percentage of serviceman is 08.25% among them male are 06.18% and female are 02.06%. Total 41.23% belong to other category and among this male is 09.28% and the female is 31.96%. The statistical test of the data shows that the occupational status and family income does not matter have association with representatives involved in Panchayat works.

**Table 8: Impact of Women Reservation**

Number of female representative entering in GP for the first time			Number of female representative entering in GP more than once due to reservation of the same seat			Number of female joined GP irrespective of reservation quota		
SC & ST	Others	Total	SC & ST	Others	Total	SC & ST	Others	Total
18	22	40(80%)	06	02	08(16%)	00	02	02(04%)

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey

The above table no. 8 it is clear that 80% of female representatives are first time entered G.P level politics due to mandate of 50% reserved for women and total 16% of women members are joining G.P more than once due reservation quota of the same seat. Only 04% of women enter G.P irrespective of reservation quota

**Table 9: Favour of Male Representatives in Reservation Policy for Women**

Don't favour	Favour but condition	Favour unconditionally
07(14.89%)	18(38.30%)	22(46.80%)

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey

Table 9 shows that 14.89% of male members of G.P are not favour the reservation policy of seats for women. Total 38.30% of male members of G.P are in favouring the reservation policy for women, but on the condition. Major portion of male members 46.80% support unconditionally this reservation policy for women.



**Table 10: Status of Women Representatives through Family Support for their Participation in Panchayat**

Fully family support	Moderate type of family support	Not having family support
14(28%)	31(62%)	5(10%)

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey

In the above table 10 the data indicate 28% of women members of Gram Panchayat are getting full family support in various ways such as helping her in house hold activity, make them reach to Panchayat office, specially accompany them during night if situations arise etc. and 62% female representatives of them are having moral support their family in participating of Gram Panchayat. And 10% of them are, mostly from minority communities destitute of family support in this regard.

**Table 11: Perception about the role of Political Activities in Women Panchayat Members**

Political Role	Members(50)	Percentage
Political Consciousness	27	54%
Knowledge of electoral politics	25	50%
Participation of women in political party's function	31	62%
Awareness level of women political parties ideology	12	24%

Source: Data Collected During Field Survey

Table 11 shows total numbers of women representatives in 50 among them 27 member's that means 54% women are conscious all about political system and 50% women representatives are aware their electoral politics.62% women representatives are conscious parties meeting, campaigns etc. but very low percentage that means 24% of women members knows their parties ideology.

## 6. Conclusion & Recommendations

The present study has focused women empowerment through political participation in Gram Panchayat in Dinhata – I Block of Cooch Behar District, West Bengal this study conducted to know their socio-economic profile, Awareness, Knowledge, various problems of women in participation related to Gram Panchayat level politics. The study has been conducted 07 Gram Panchayat of Dinhata – I Block and the total respondent 97 including both male and female representatives, this 07 selected Gram Panchayat are – Bara Atiabari –I, Bara Atiabari – II, Bara Soulmari, Bhetaguri – I, Dinhata Village – II, Petla, Putimari – I and upon the data analysis, personal interviews and societal scenario it.

The implementation of the three tiers Panchayati Raj as well as fifty per cent reservation of the seats for the 'Half of the sky' is undoubtedly the most significant phase in developing the concept of the participatory democracy and social justice for women. Conceptually the idea is definitely 'Revolutionary One'. It is true that there is a difference between the concept and practice. Despite of such difference, the fifty per cent reservation of the seats in the Panchayati Raj has ushered a new epoch. This is



conceptually true. But the execution of the scheme has carried many negative elements in her baggage. Honestly speaking in the time of my field works particularly oral interviews, I have seen different types of limitations. This is avoidable limitations. If the 'Second gender' gets the opportunity of the basic education, the limitations can be avoided? However, I am coming to highlight the negative aspects of the execution of the scheme.

1. It appears to me, a section of the family who had once got the test of the social, political and financial powers, they have been trying to monopolise powers for their family. Let me explain the matter. In the first time, the wife became the Pradhan or Panchayat. In the second time take the opportunity of rotation system, the husband got the nomination and elected Pradhan or Panchayat. In the time, the father-in-law got the ticket and elected Pradhan or Panchayat. This way, a particular family have been monopolising the power of the Gram Panchayat, like the hereditary king we found the same trend of the dynastic and family power politics.
2. In the time of field works I have seen that the wife or sister-in-law was the pradhans, but in the time of decision- making, the husbands are directly influencing on her opinion. This is a common practice because the wife knew little about the rules, regulations and laws of the Government in regard to the execution of power.
3. Due to non-exposure of basic education and ignorance of proper laws related to Panchayat system are the basic two hurdles for women to participate in the same. Moreover, women in our country are seen as house maker, making her to dedicate most time of her day to raise the family, which is another big obstacle towards participation of women in political system properly.
4. One of the most unsaid problems that the women face at their work place is harassment (sexual or otherwise) due to this woman required all kinds of empowerment in order to protect them to secure their purity and dignity at the place of work and everywhere. As women are economically very poor all over the nation, very few women capable of finding a service or other activities so that they cannot stare eye to eye to their male counterparts. These problems exist in all fields where women are finding their way through reservations and this requires immediate attention
5. It is observed that there were most of the female Pradhans or Panchayats elected for the first time and first experience as well and due to these they cannot take on any decision on any problem related matters and also they cannot raise their voice towards the present problems in reality.

Based on the study and the present condition of rural women in India in specifically in my selected areas and politics it can be recommended that –

1. There should be created more awareness campaigns of the women's rights granted by the constitutions of India and also these awareness campaign should be highlighted the provision of law, the legal assistance and remedies available towards the rural women's.
2. Rural women should be emphasised more and more on education because it is evident during the field survey the main reasons behind the poor level of performance of women members are lack of education and economic dependency.
3. Proper training for them in highly essential for the all members of Gram Panchayat both men and women relating to the various activities and responsibilities of Gram Panchayat but special priority for women members because majority portion of women elected members entered on Panchayat for the first time due to reservation policy.
4. Women's should be given priority their opinions in general Panchayat meetings.



5. It must be ensured that female representatives from every part of communities get a basic income and social security. This would make them self-dependent and pivotal force of elected women representatives in Panchayat will reckon.
6. Numbers of NGOs should be increased to work at par regarding rural development of women and sufficient aids must be provided for such organisation, following due diligence, to work for women along with elected female representatives

In this regards I think that, despite the limitations and problems faced by female representatives in Panchayati raj or the fifty percent reservation for the women in the three tier Panchayat scheme, its far reaching effects is very much effective one, with the passage of time, many of the limitations which arose out of the implication of the programme will be disappeared. But it is very difficult to wipe out the inherent limitations. The experiences will help the government to erase out limitation. Be that as it may, in order to rectify the operation part of the Panchayati Raj frame. Some states of India have given 50% reservation for the women in the Panchayati level election. It is also same in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal but it is clear that the women are participating nominally in the Panchayat level election. Even they cannot take decision-making power by own and they are also influencing by the family members. Due to this several reasons it cannot illustrate that the women are fully empowered in the participation of politics. Even when the women can take decisions by own and also can work on the matter relating to political as well as developmental activities by own, it can say that the women have been empowered. But the government is the only body who can empower the women through proper guidance as well as several legal rules or regulations. However, these issues are not existed for a long time if the government fully focuses on the women related issues then diffidently may be solve.

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