

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION: A CASE STUDY IN ASSAM

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Abstract: In spite of having legal and constitutional rights in marriage, inheritance and participation in public affairs; women are still subjected to discrimination due to the existing social structure. They continue to suffer from discrimination, harassment and humiliation. The condition of rural women is more pitiable than that of their urban counterpart. The framers of 73rd Constitution amendment Act had the argument that social and economic status of women could not be improved much without political power. In this paper an attempt has been made to evaluate the changing status of elected women representatives after they are politically empowered through Panchayat.

Keywords: *Social construction, empowerment, political empowerment, Panchayati Raj.*

Introduction: All over the world and particularly in South and East Asia the gender problem has loomed large during the current years. The gender problem in the context of new forces of development assumes a vital importance. As we know, the simplest way to distinguish between sex and gender is to define sex as biological and therefore, given and gender as socially and culturally constructed, and, therefore variable over space and time. Whereas multiple sexual encounters for man are seen as positive sign of their virility, menstruations for women is seen as polluting in many cultures. Actually gender is constructed in part through the organization of our culturally experienced bodies [1]. Many Sociologists begin from the assumption that human behavior is largely directed and determined by culture that is the learned recipes for behavior shared by members of a society. The norms, values and roles are culturally determined and socially transmitted. From this perspective gender roles are a product of culture rather than biology. Individuals learn their respective male and female roles. The sexual division of labor is supported and justified by a belief and value system which states that gender roles are normal, natural, right and proper. Hence, social construction through which we understand our everyday experience, make moral judgements and classify other people according to religion, sex, caste etc. are culturally determined and can be changed. The social processes like socialisation and education also help to make a particular kind of social construction enduring and widely accepted. Gender is a product of such social construction. It is also shaped within the given cultural apparatus of a society. In a patriarchal society woman is considered as inferior to male and for most of the social scientist the important question is why they are placed in an inferior position in the patriarchal structure. The lower position of women is nothing but a socially constructed reality. In patriarchal structure women considers themselves as inferior to male and the reason behind that is the nature of socialisation in the patriarchal society. In traditional Indian society, a woman has accepted the patriarchal domination without any arguments and has accepted the norms, values, roles, status assigned to them. At many occasions they have followed such norms which

are not favourable to them. The way women have evaluated themselves, their view of the society is the subjective reality. Generation after generation they have accepted the patriarchal hegemony through the process of socialisation. On the other hand the meaning given to women by the society is objective reality for them. Therefore, in patriarchy, the objective reality for women is that they are inferior to male and the subjective reality is that they have judge themselves as inferior to male due to socialization. Berger and Lucmann comments- "*all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products, their existence has its base in the lives of concrete individuals and has no empirical status apart from this lives*[2]. Therefore, the role and responsibility of women in different cultures is legitimized by the respective cultures and therefore it is human products and socially constructed.

Empowerment and Women empowerment: Empowerment in the literature refers to the act of bestowing power and authority on some one. It is the process of bringing about a transformation in all walks of the life of every individual citizen of the country. The aim is to provide to them a sense of participation and to give them the secure feeling that their voice will be heard irrespective of their economic and social status. The term empowerment is not just a rhetorical device but also an active tool to achieve change with justice. Though some envisage empowerment of an individual as conferring the individual with rights in decision making and achieving self-reliance, it also connotes collective empowerment of marginalized groups. Empowerment of women is a holistic concept. The World Bank has suggested that empowerment of women should be a key aspect of social development programs (World Bank, 2001). It is multi-dimensional in its approach and covers social, political, economic and social aspects. Of all these facets of women's development, economic empowerment is of utmost significance in order to achieve a lasting and sustainable development of society[3]. United Nations (2001) defines empowerment as the processes by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices. Empowerment of Women involves many things, economic opportunity, property rights, political

representation, social equality, personal rights and so on. Historically the world over, either by law or by custom, the status of women is undermined by asymmetrical power relationships in decision-making, personal and social rights, access to resources and entitlement [4]. Thus, women empowerment refers to the conferring of leverage to women who are otherwise deprived. This includes granting to women effectual decision-making power/authority and the power to influence others decisions along with economic, social and civil freedom. In India, as in most developing countries, women are believed to be and treated as inferior to men. Moreover, as the lives of women and men are embedded in a matrix of unequal gender relations, a decrease in the gender inequality is necessary for an outcome of 'empowerment' for women. In other words, changes such as increased income, skills and self-confidence, may be better understood as enablers that promote women's empowerment. However, the women, in order to be significantly empowered to achieve their perceived goal, firstly need authority at home, which in most cases they do not have. The process should, therefore, be carried out concurrently at home and outside. Within the family they must have equal say as men and so should be the case at work. The most extensive element of women empowerment is providing them with social rank, status and justice. Major attributes that contribute to women empowerment are education, social equity and status, improved health, economic or financial stability and political participation [5]. The basic principles associated with women empowerment are welfare, access, awareness raising, participation and control. Welfare addresses only the basic needs of women, without recognizing or attempting to solve the underlying structural causes which necessitate provision of welfare services. Women are merely passive beneficiaries of welfare benefits. Equality of access to resources such as educational opportunities, land and credit is essential for women to make meaningful progress. Awareness-raising is very crucial ingredients for women to take appropriate action to close gender gaps or gender inequalities. There must be recognition that their problems stem from inherent structural and institutional discrimination. They must also recognize the role that women themselves often play in reinforcing the system that restricts their growth. Participation is the point where women take decisions equally alongside men. Mobilization is necessary in order to reach this level. Women will be empowered to gain increased representation, by organizing themselves and working collectively, which will lead to increased empowerment and ultimately greater control. Control is the ultimate level of equality and empowerment, where there is a balance of power between women and men and neither has dominance. Women are able to make decisions regarding their lives and the lives of their children and play an active role in the development process. The contributions of women are fully recognized and

rewarded.

Elected Women Representatives and their Changing Status: In the present Indian society, though women have enjoyed legal and constitutional rights in marriage, inheritance and participation in public affairs; they are still subjected to discrimination due to the social attitudes of males and the existing customs prevailing in society. However, high status of women might have been raised under the law, in practice they continue to suffer from discrimination, harassment and humiliation [6]. It is true that women still constitute a deprived and tormented section of society. The condition of rural women is more pitiable than that of their urban counterpart due to the existing social structure unfavourable for women in the rural society. The framers of 73rd Constitution amendment Act had the argument that social and economic status of women could not be improved much without political power. The female of the village need to be given some political power. They should have their share in decision making about the development of their village [7]. Through participation in institution like panchayati raj women can join in the income earning activities which make them self reliant and ultimately makes them empowered. Women are an integral part of every economy. All round development and harmonious growth of a nation would be possible only when women are considered as equal partners in progress with men. Empowerment of women is essential to harness the women labor in the main stream of economic development. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution is regarded as a mile stone in the history of Panchayati Raj System, which has ensured leadership and the participation of women in the decision making process [8]. This will definitely uplift their social status. However, women representatives have still to prove themselves in this new empowered status. Though the women are given power in local self government, do they really able to play active role in decision making process? If not what are the problems they facing? Is there any contribution from them in uplifting their own condition? What role should they play for solving their problem? Etc are some important questions towards the status of women in the context of present society especially in rural areas after the 73rd amendment. UNDP Report indicates that while 67% of the world's work is done by women, only 10% of global income is earning by women and a mere 1% of global property is owned by women [9]. Though the constitution of India facilitates women equal rights in all spheres, still active participation in the political affairs and decision making process remains a dream for the women folk. The existing socio-cultural structure characterize by patriarchal hegemony does not allow a woman to move freely. Many studies on the changing status of women reveals that even after the endeavour made by the government to empower them womens are merely passive beneficiaries of welfare benefits. Even after their participation in the political affairs male have their

greater in the all aspects of social life. The present study has made an effort to examine the changing social status of women in rural India by analyzing the status of elected women representatives. Effort has also been made to interpret hoe the existing structure influences their activities in everyday life.

Objectives of the study:

1. To study the political awareness of the elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj institution
2. To study their problems in active participation in the development programmes
3. To study their nature of participation in the rural development programmes
4. To study their role in decision making in the family as well as in the society at large

Methodology:The study is purposive, empirical and analytical in nature. The material for the study have been collected both from the primary as well as secondary sources. The primary data forming the basis of the study are collected with the help of personal interview by taking the aid of the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted personally on the month of September July 2013, and secondary data were collected from the available government and Non-government publications.

Universe of the study: The universe of the present study is Dhemaji district which shelter a population of 5, 71,944 as per 2001 census, which includes 294643 males and 22301 females. The sex ratio is 936 female against per thousands males. The average density of population is 176 per sq.km. The scheduled Tribe and scheduled caste population of the district works out to be 47.29% and 5.33% respectively of the total population. The urban population is only 1.85% which indicates the predominantly the rural character of inhabitants. The literacy rate is 41.69% while the female literacy rate is 13.6% only. Total number of village in Dhemaji district is 1350 and total no of Gaon Panchayat is 65. The sample of 50 respondents are selected purposefully from all the village panchayats encompassing Dhemaji, Bordoloni, Machkhoa, Sessiborgaon, Sissitangani, Pub-Jonai and Semen Chapori Jila Parishad constituencies.

Findings:

Socio- economic background of the elected women representatives: In socio-economic background respondents were asked about their age, caste, marital status, educational status, type of family, no of children. All these aspects are given importance keeping in view of the positive and negative corelation of these variables with their active and passive participation in the development programmes. The study reveals that 40% of the respondents were in the age group of 35-45 years and followed by the age group of 45-55 which consisted of 28% and only 8% belonged to 55+ categories. There is the domination of younger age group in the Panchayati Raj institution. Majority of the respondents (84%) were married, 12% were widowed and only 4% were unmarried. Educational Status of the elected representatives can play a key role in mobilizing the

village people and their active participation in the village development programmes. But the educational status of the respondents in the study area was not encouraging. 76% of them were under matric. Lower educational attainment of the representatives results little knowledge about the system. In such situation, it is very difficult for them to play active role and take decision in developmental activities. So, though they are politically empowered, their role as Panchayat member remains questionable. Their lower educational qualification also indicates their lower status in the society, since education play a key role in the upliftment of one's status. In the present study it is revealed that a large portion of the respondents (60%) are representing the disadvantaged sections of society (48% ST, 12% SC). About 28% belongs to OBC and 12 % from general category. It was due to the domination of tribal population in the area and also the result of reservation policy for the SCs and STs. It can be said that reservation policy raised the status of women in rural areas specially the women belonging to STs. 40% of the respondents were from joint family background and 60% were from nuclear family background.

Decision making role of the elected women representatives: Regarding decision making in the family affairs, the study reveals that before elected as a gaon panchayat member only 20% of the respondents from joint family played active role in decision making, 10% jointly took decision and majority of the respondent (70%) played passive role in the decision making process. However, after elected as a member the percentage of passive role in decision making in family affairs reduced to 55% which was previously 70%. Again 25% became joint decision maker which was previously only 10%.

In case of the nuclear family 40% played active role in family decisions which is greater than the respondents from joint family. Only 13.33% of them played passive role and 46.7% jointly take decisions which is also far different from their joint counterparts. The data reveals that the role of women in the decision making in the family affairs after elected as a gaon panchayat member had raised to some extent especially in case of joint family respondents. The elected members from nuclear family had the better ability to make their decision in social sphere as well as in village development. 84% of the representatives are married and in the decision making process their husbands and family members generally played the active role. They are empowered for name sake only, practically the situation is different. The representatives who fail to take decision in the family affairs, independently, how can one aspect from them to take decisions in the social sphere? However, from it is also revealed from the study that there are differences of the status of the respondents in the joint and nuclear setting. Therefore it may happen that elected representatives from nuclear family background has the better ability to take decisions in the social sphere too.

Problems in the maintenance of family affairs:

Indian women have to perform official and familial roles simultaneously. In case of the elected members, they have to play a key role in the development of village especially in the upliftment of the women's condition and status. At the same time they have to perform their duties towards their family. Role conflict becomes obvious in such a situation. Regarding their regular visits and participations in the Panchayat meeting, 25% of the respondents from joint family and 88% of nuclear family stated that they have to face problems in the maintenance of household activities, 40% of joint family and 60% of nuclear family respondents have the problem of looking after their child. 50% of the respondents have to devote time for the parents in law. 75% of the respondents from joint family find difficulties to maintain good relationship with family members as panchayat member and 20% from nuclear family had these problems. Elected members from joint background have to suffer a lot in the family for the role they have to perform in the society at large. It results in lack of interest and participation in the development programmes.

Elements that motivated to join in electoral process: A family environment attends to politics can be an important factor underlying the choice of politics as a career. All the respondents have come to politics for the first time and also due to the encouragement of their husband, relatives and neighbors'. 66.7% from general category, 42.9% from OBC, 20.8% of ST, and 50% from SC willingly came forward to join in politics. 35.7% of the OBC and 16.6% of the ST respondents were forced by the family members to join in politics. In General category 33.33%, OBC 21.4%, ST 25% and SC 50% were forced by their husbands. It is interesting to note that respondents from ST category stated that their neighbors' (45.8%) forced them to join in politics. Most of the respondents have little political knowledge and lack of interest in political affairs. One cannot expect from them active participation in developmental activities. In spite of their political empowerment, their social status remains the same. Respondents from all the categories (General, OBC, ST, and SC) elected for the first time as a panchayat member. So, the study reveals that majority of the respondents were coming to politics mainly due to external forces rather than their political will. 40% of the elected representatives were from joint family background. They revealed that their family and kin group votes help them to elect as a panchayat member. But on the other hand they had their problem to play their assigned role actively due to the family burden. Representatives from both nuclear and joint family reveal that they have to simultaneously perform the duties towards the family as well as for the society. So they can not fully devote themselves in the village development.

Activities and problems in performing role as a member of Panchayat: The respondents were asked regarding the activities they have performed as a Panchayat member, 64% of the respondents regularly attended the meetings of the Panchayat. Only 40% took

leadership in different affairs of the village. 46% of the respondents stated about their active participation in the planning programme, camps and meetings organized for the purpose of development. 82% of the respondents have three and more than three (16%) children. One cannot expect from them that they could mobilize the rural women for family planning. Only 32% of elected women representatives frequently organized meetings to discuss various socio-economic and political problems of the village. So, the role of women in the development of the village is questionable.

When the respondents were asked why they were not in a position to play the assigned role actively, 64% of the respondents stated that due to their lower educational qualification they failed to give justification to their role. 80% of the respondents had stated that they had little knowledge about the Panchayat system. 90% of them revealed that they did not get sufficient training as Panchayat member which stands as a hindrance in proper role play. 60% of them revealed about the male domination in decision making. 80% of the respondents were well aware about their politics in the locality. Only 6% were aware about the present scenario of the national politics. 12% were well-aware about mass-media. So, political awareness among the respondents was not encouraging and their status remains the same even after constitutional provisions being made. Lack of political awareness (local, state, national) of the representatives is a discouraging aspect as it is revealed from the study. So, it cannot be said that they enjoyed a high political status. As we know majority of the respondents were belonging to younger age group and majority of the same were married. It is observed that the younger women members are not supposed to move out of the house fully in the village community. If they do, aspersions are cast on their character. They have a heavy load of family responsibility, child caring and attending to household duties. It seems that family responsibility is a factor that definitely comes in the way of younger women who are married and mothers of small children. It is seen that the women representatives who have less family responsibility or who can share that with other family members are in a better position to accept being on the PRIs. The participation of the members in youth association, Panchayat meetings is very low. They had a little exposure to mass media.

Conclusion: Empowerment in its broadest sense is the expansion of freedom of choice and action (World Bank). Only empowerment in the political sphere is not sufficient to give emancipation of women from patriarchal hegemony. Women need to empower themselves from below, and this calls for a change of values and behavior and the need for economic empowerment. Political empowerment alone cannot enable women to articulate their own aspirations and strategies for change. It alone cannot change the underlying inequalities in terms of power relations in different spheres such as economic, political, cultural and also in different levels like individual, household,

community, market, institutional. As we know there is a clear and disguised relationship between individual consciousness and social structure [10]. Policies are meant affect both the level of consciousness and the existing social structure. In our empirical study on the elected women representatives to Panchayat we have applied a specific theoretical framework available in the Sociological literature to understand the phenomenon of women empowerment. To have understanding on women empowerment one must have clear knowledge on how the social structure (social institutions) of a given society influences the awareness of women (consciousness) about their status in the given society. Lower status of women in the society is socially constructed and for that reason even after having constitutional provisions the women cannot come forward and they just remains under male domination. All problems centre on inequality and therefore, steps to promote equality of treatment and full integration of women in the development of the country must be promoted [11]. Greater access to education, health, skill building, credit facilities and opportunities for decision making and legal rights should be made available to

women to empower them[12]. In social hierarchy, women mostly in the rural areas constitute to remain in the lower strata compared to the men. The efforts over the decades have also been changing steadily over the years- from social, economic empowerment to political empowerment [13]. To attain social development the supporting efforts of governments and civil society towards gender equality, rights of children and elderly etc. are very essential. The civil society should take initiatives for gender equality through empowerment of women. The government and non- government sectors have both been pushing ahead with programmes aimed at imparting education to women, giving them better health care, providing them with means of livelihood and opportunities to participate in the decision making process at home and in the society. Special attention is being paid to improve the lot of the girl child giving her better chances of survival and opportunities for living a life of fulfilment[14]. The linkage of woman empowerment to good governance and larger development of the nation is getting acknowledged with a need for multi stakeholder response and a multi disciplinary approach .

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