



## PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PRIS: A STUDY OF BALIANTA BLOCK IN KHURDA DISTRICT, ODISHA

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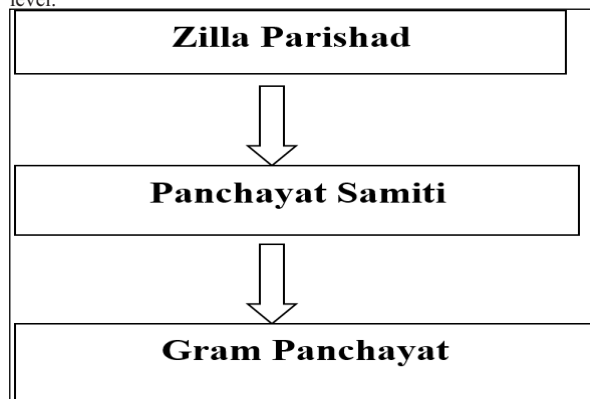
**ABSTRACT** *This is the era of Women Empowerment. Women empowerment is not limited to any confined segment of the society, rather it aims at the wholistic approach. So with this context the role of women in the field of politics is also equally imperative. And when it come to the politics at the grassroots level that makes their role quite a more significant as they are well connected to the society.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Women, Politics, PRIs, Grassroot level democracy*

Village panchayat has a long history in India. It represents the ancient governance system of India. Mahatma Gandhi has rightly said independence must begin at the bottom. 'Every village ought to be a republic or panchayat with the authority and resources to realize the potential for economic and social development of the village.' This view of Gandhiji is also found in the Article 40 of the Indian Constitution, which says that "the state shall take steps to organise village panchayats with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government."

### Understanding Panchayati Raj Institution

'Panchayat' literally means assembly (ayat) of five (panch) wise and respected elders chose and accepted by the local community. The traditional function of panchayat was to settle the disputes between the individuals and villages. But Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is relatively new, having originated during the British administration. PRIs works at three levels viz. village, block and district. It is otherwise known as the three-tier structure of village administration, where the Gram Panchayat (GP) works at the village level, Panchayat Samiti (PS) works at the block level and the Zilla Parishad works at the district level.



**Three-Tier structure of PRIS**

### Aims And Objectives Of PRIs

PRIs include the following aims and objectives:

- i. Establishment of Gram Sabha and the three tiers of panchayats.
- ii. Regular elections on every five years.
- iii. Reservation of not less than one third seats for women as members and chairpersons at all the three levels.
- iv. Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs.
- v. Constitution of State Election Commission.
- vi. Constitution of State Finance Commission.

### Women In PRIs

Women's historic exclusion from political structures and processes is the result of multiple structural, functional and personal factors that vary in different social contexts across the countries. Women have been kept outside the public domain of politics as most of the political thinkers and philosophers like Plato, Arisotle, John Lock, Thomas Hobbes had considered women fit only for the private sphere where the roles are confined to the domestic works and there is no place for women in politics because of their suitability in caring roles as mothers and wives (Phillips 1998', Rai 2000<sup>2</sup>). But womens's representation in

PRIs became prominent only after the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act which made the 33% of reservation for women at the local self- governance system which has been increased to 50% in 2011 . Before this the role of women was only limited as the members of Mahila Mandals or as National Extension Services. The present paper makes an attempt to study the role of women at this grass roots level of democracy which is popularly known as PRIs.

### Objectives Of The Study:

The study was propelled by the general interest of the researchers to delve into the role of women at PRIs and to dictate the plight of woman in the changing scenario of the post 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act. However, the focus of the study hovered around the following specific objectives.

- To document the socio-economic background of the women leaders in PRIs.
- To understand the level of awareness of women reservation made for them in PRIs.
- To locate their participation they have in the floor of PRIs.
- To explore the problems faced by the women leaders while performing their roles.

### The process they got elected

All the women respondents covered under the study were recently elected in this year of 2012. The current study tried to inquire about the background of the women leaders regarding their entry into the field of politics in general and at the grass roots level democracy in particular. And it gave a very rosy picture that all most all the women leaders responded in a similar manner that they are in the post only because they are being asked by their family/villagers to be in the post. To the utter surprise the study found that the women only stood because the seat was reserved for women otherwise any male member could have contested on their behalf. While discussing about the political background of the family of the women leaders, it was also seen that in most cases their family had a direct or indirect connection with politics, which forced them to be in the process of politics. Very few respondents were from the non-political background. It seems in order to keep the three P's (Power, Position, and Prestige) with their family only the women are used as a tool. When the question of support emerged, it was envisioned that maximum women leaders were contesting as an independent candidate and not from any political party. And in terms of supports they had received some kinds of supports of finance, campaign e.t.c. from some political parties. But the best part of the study is that all the women in their respectable post were through election and not through selection. They have come through the proper channel starting from the process of nomination to election and finally succeeding to achieve the post.

### Reason for contesting election

Panda (1999) study observed that the most of the women entered the Panchayat Raj Institution due to persuasion by their family members and pressure from the village community, pressure from political party and their personal interests. the present study also found various reasons behind their participation which includes the pressure from family, community and also another major reason is the non-availability of women candidate. Though women had entered because of various factors still they too have an aim of serving at the village level mostly and with the special focus on fulfilling certain major needs of the people. At some cases the women leaders responded that the villagers of their own village had developed a faith on them and had encouraged them to contest for the post. The various reasons found in the present study has been presented in the table no. 1.

**Table No.1 Distribution Of Respondents On The Basis Of The Reasons Behind Their Participation**

Reasons	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Pressure from family members	12	48
Help the people	2	8
Pressure from the community	4	16
Non-Availability of women representatives	7	28

So the above table reflects the various reasons of women for participating in the process of grass roots level democracy, while visualizing that family members are the first and foremost reason for their entry into this process, followed by another major reason is the non-availability of women representatives and pressure from community respectively.

#### **Awareness Among The Women Representatives**

The study has categorised this variable of awareness into three aspects. Those are awareness about the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment Act, awareness about their roles to be performed and the awareness on government schemes and policies.

#### **Awareness about 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act**

Mohanty (2001) has rightly said that women representatives at the grassroots level democracy are the daughters of 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act. But the findings of the present study are very disheartening. Because the level of awareness about this 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act among the women leaders is quite low. Either the women are absolutely unaware or they are partially aware about this Act. A very few women leaders could say something about it. While talking about the partial awareness it refers that the women had heard about 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act through various sources and only with specific reference to the women reservation. The level of awareness among the women leaders is provided in the table no.2.

**Table No.2 Distribution Of Respondents On The Basis Of Their Level Of Awareness**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Aware	2	8
Partially Aware	11	44
Unaware	7	28
No response	5	20

It is quite evident from the above table that though the women hold a major position in the structure of PRIS still the level of awareness among them is quite low. The result shows that either the women are partially aware or they are absolutely unaware.

#### **Awareness About Their Roles**

With the changing time the level of awareness among the women leaders regarding their own roles is also changing. It was quite an interesting finding of the study that the women responded in a very easy way that, they are representing some people through the position they acquire and it is their duty that they should at least fulfil the basic needs of the people. While talking of various needs of the people they said the basic requirement of the people is to provide them the BPL cards, Widow Pension, Old age pension, creating SHGs for empowering women etc. Though they are not able to recognise that what their position is and what are the various other activities which they have to perform, still the minimum awareness to meet the needs of the people in their own locality was their prime focus.

#### **Awareness On Government Schemes/ Policies**

As it is a well known fact that the state government has strengthened the panchayat raj system so that various schemes and policies which were unable to reach the poor people at the grassroots level could reach them. While discussing about various plans, policies schemes it has a wide range including Gram Sabha Sashaktikaran Karyakram, Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM), MGNREGA, Swarna Jayanti Gram Swa Rojgar Yojna, Community Development etc. But in the present study the women are only aware of very few of these schemes and policies. Rather they are only aware of the those schemes which are required by the people as discussed earlier like the PDS, Pension, SHG etc.

#### **Roles Performed By Women Leaders**

As the women leaders were recently elected in 2012, so they still have a lot to do. To quote a woman "*we are new in this field and have not got enough work to do and we will do better in future*" But some women

shared their vision that they have developed for their own village/panchayat. Some women also have formed few Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in their own locality in order to promote the position of other women. They are regularly conducting the meeting i.e the nodal meeting where everyone including teachers, para teachers, anganwadi workers, meets together for discussing various issues related to their own specific areas. They even attend the meetings at the block level. They viewed that initially attending such meetings or conducting such meeting were not easy for them rather they developed this habit in course of the time. Though the women were representing some crucial positions in the Three- Tier structure of Panchayati Raj, still they consider that politics is not the right place for women. They consider that engaging themselves in this work they are somehow getting distracted from their household responsibilities and are neglecting their children. To quote one of the women leader "if I would have continued as a house wife then that would have been better for me. But because of the election we have done so much expenditure that we do not have any saving now for us. It would have been better if my husband would have contested because he can perform better than me and I could have managed my home". This clearly visualizes that the lack of any incentives or encouragement leads to demoralizing the women in performing the role. As there is no reward or recognition given to them while doing their roles they are getting distracted from their work and also consider their work as unnecessary in the system.

**Table No.3 Distribution Of Respondents On The Basis Of Their Perception About Their Role**

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Little importance	12	48
Great importance	7	28
Not importance	6	24

The above table clearly reflects on the perception of the women leaders about their own role. As discussed earlier it also proves that as they consider that their role is within the domestic spheres so for them their role in the system of PRIs is also of less importance.

#### **Problems Faced By The Women**

While focusing on the problems faced by the women leaders, it can be broadly categorized into two parts that are problems face at the household level and the other is the problem faced at the professional level. So far as the household problem is concerned, in most cases the women faces a restrictive attitude towards their participation. Even sometimes the old women their localities also discourage them as they consider women are the private sphere and have to do the domestic work. It is viewed by most women leaders that they are in a dialectical position as they are being pressurized by their family and community to represent in the particular position and at the same time they are also being asked to focus more on their the domestic work rather than focusing on the other works.

When focused on the professional dimension it has been observed that in most of the case the women take the help of the male members in their family in performing their role. Even for attending any meeting they always prefer to go with them, because they feel safe and secured when accompanied by the male members of their family in such public gathering. The security is in both sense that is the physical security and the other is the mental security. While discussing about the mental aspect they say that it becomes easier for them to understand anything in the meeting only if they are accompanied by the male member of their family. While analyzing the reason behind this it has been observed it is due to the lack of awareness among the women that they prefer to be accompanied.

#### **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

According to the recommendation of Beijing "Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but also can be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of the decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved."

This recommendation of Beijing clearly states the need of women in the field of politics as a key instrument for achieving gender equality. One of the three variables used in the construction of the Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) is the relative share of women in

administrative and managerial position (UNDP 1995). Women need to be involved in decision making process in order to bring their demands in the national agenda. So the reservation of 1/3<sup>rd</sup> seats for women in grass roots democracy is a major step taken toward the empowerment of women.

The present study also found that there is the participation of women at the grassroots level democracy. Though they enter into the field due to some external forces still there is also a growing interest among the women to do some major activities for their own village or panchayat. The issue of gender justice can truly be proved through this participation of women. With the little awareness if the women can think about their village and panchayat then it could be much better if the participation could be based on training and increasing the level of awareness of women.

Thus to strengthen women's participation in the field of politics and particularly in Three- Tier Panchayat Raj System following suggestions need to be followed.

- Women should be encouraged to join the system of their own instead of any kind of pressure on them.
- The level of awareness needs to be increased among the women through various trainings, workshops regarding the structure and function of PRIs.
- The dichotomy of public and private has to stop for creating a free and proper platform for the women representatives.
- Proper incentives should be provided to the women leader though which they can be motivated to perform their role more effectively and efficiently.
- Proper facilities should be provided to the women leaders for the safety and security reasons.

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