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**Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj and Decentralized Planning:  
A study in Sagar Block South 24 Parganas District of West Bengal**

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**Abstract**

*Women constituting half of the population of our country have been an integral part of our social structure due to their contribution to the socio-economic development can't possible. For sustainable socio-economic development to take place in any country, it is necessary that women participate in the political process. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered as a means to good governance and 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment was effected in the hope that it would lead to better governance and provide political space to the disadvantaged sections of the society like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Women. But still in rural India the communities have a strong division between men and women, defining and regulating their roles, responsibilities, benefits, privileges, opportunities, access and control over resources and decision making processes. It also seen many part of the country women who are elected are not always treated with due respect, not consider their suggestions seriously and also pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions made by the male dominated Panchayats. This study based on women elected representatives in Sagar block of South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The present paper highlights the extent of participation of women elected representative in Panchayat and some case studies to identify the problems faced by them.*

**Keywords: Participation, Women, Panchayati Raj and Development.**

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**Introduction:** Most of the Indian rural women are engaged in domestic work. Some of them are also engage in other activate like collection of food, fodder and fuel collection etc. although rural women contrite a large section of population of our country; they have still not so comfortable participated in politics (Ghosh 2002). The Government of India insure to participation of women's in local self-government take a historical steps in 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment made it obligatory that 33 percent reservation in all the three tiers of panchayati raj institutions for women. Major goal of reservation of sets having women at the decision making level has been achieved. But, just having women in large numbers is not enough. The issue that remains to be understood is that with the given conservative background, will the

elected members actually be able to participate in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (Singla 2007). The question also arises in their participation because of their long standing neglected social status in male-dominated Indian society (Gochhayat 2013).

Accordingly, through the amendment (1992) this reservation policy was incorporated in the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973, not only that all the Gram Panchayats have constituted five (5) Upa-Samitis (introduced in the Act in 2003) among which “Nari O Sishu Unnayan O Samaj Kalyan” would look after the women and children. Participation of grassroots women at gram Panchayats level has been also ensured by the amendment (1992) of West Bengal Panchayat Act putting the provision of Gram-sansad compulsory twice in a year. In recent past before the 2013 West Bengal Panchayat election West Bengal Legislative Assembly has also passed the West Bengal Panchayat Election Bill, 2012 which provides 50% reservation for women, in elections. It also seen many part of the country and states women who are elected are not always treated with due respect, not consider their suggestions seriously and also pressurized by their husbands to approve their decisions made by the male dominated Panchayats. The paper highlights the issues of participation of women elected representative in Panchayat.

**Review of Literature:** A number of literature based on empirical studies are available on the women participation in Panchayat Raj Institution and Decentralize Planning. We have gone through some research works which can be classified as some dealing with the profile of the women members; some dealing with their performance problem and empowerment, some dealing with the reservation and some dealing with the identification of constraints and strengths of women members. Some works regarding women participation in Panchayat Raj Institution and Decentralize Planning in West Bengal are as follows:

**Lieten. (1992)** His study reflected that most of the women members had contact with the public either socially or politically before their election. They were mostly from poor peasant-families and not with much education but very active in awareness generation among rural women and against gender differences.

**Lieten (1994)** also carried another study on women representatives at Ramnagar block of Midnapore this study showed that most of the Women members were direct from the kitchen. They had no experience with politics. But most of them were with class VIII education level. They recognized the improvement of educational achievement and also about their liberty and free movement and access with the people after being elected.

**Mukhopadhyay (1995)** he was did this case-study covering 13 members of Kultikri Gram Panchayat of Sankrail Panchayat Samiti of Paschim Midnapore. His research question was about the profile of the members and the performance of this all women gram-panchayat. This study showed that all the members were from the peasant –families having no significant academic background and without any experience of serving in any panchayat. But all the women functionaries were “articulate, active and effectively participating in decision making”.

**Ghosh (1997)** showed the various contradictions towards women participation. He studied all the Panchayat Samitis of all the districts of West-Bengal except South 24 Parganas, Malda and Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad. The main research question was to find out the women representation in different standing – committees of the Panchayat Samiti and their assigned tasks. The study revealed that the women members were the prey of gender-biasness. Though the total strength of women members was (33.65 per cent), but the district-wise representation of women against the post of Karmadhyakshas was only (16.55 per cent). Regarding assignments it was found that women chairpersons were given

the functions like, health, education, sports, social work etc. They were not given any tasks like, infrastructure development, land, forest, agriculture etc.

**Ghosh (2002)** his study portrayed that the women members were very active in identification of problems in their locality and capable enough to pursue any programme in Panchayat. Women were very much conscious about their legal rights (property related or matrimonial cases) and also making aware the village women regarding this. Women members identified constraints like, their financial dependence on other and lack of attitude towards life.

**Chakravarti Banerjee (2002)** has done a study, namely, mainly on socio-economic profile of the elected representatives of three-tier panchayats. The researcher had chosen the district of Hooghly as the research field and covered leaders of 201 gram-panchayats, 17 Panchayat Samitis and Zilla-Parishad. Her research question was about the social and political background of the panchayat leaders. She compared the profiles of the Panchayat leaders elected in 1983 with that of 1988. This study showed that the average and typical leaders in West-Bengal are rather young and reasonably well-educated. Most of the leaders are from low-income group. It has been seen in this study that the panchayati raj is no monolith. Though this study covered little on women issues but it reflected an important feature of gender differences in this sector that is in leadership position women were still unnoticed.

**Datta & Sen (2003)** in their study identified that political intervention was one of the strong constraints towards the proper functioning of the women participants in panchayats. The issue of empowerment of the lady members should be tackled both at political and administrative levels. Not only that, it should be coupled with other issues, like, economic independence etc. This study had also discussed the cross-state situation of women representatives. This work is very exemplary but an in-depth study based on stratified sampling could be done. Sampling was done covering all the communities but no reflection was there about different castes or communities.

**Mandal (2003)** in his study revealed that but the reservation there would not have been so large number of women as member in PRIs. The fact that all women respondents could enter panchayats only as candidates sponsored by political parties points to the important role political parties play in induction and successful Panchayat role performance of women members. In other words, reservation was necessary to remind the parties that a separate social segment named women does exist and they also require to be given adequate political space.

**Objective:**

- i. To study the women participate in Panchayat system and their role.
- ii. To highlight the problems faced by Women Members in Panchayat and what ways to overcome it.
- iii. To study the women participation in decision making process in Panchayat.

**Methodology of the study:** The present study is mostly based on empirical methods. For this study, schedules were employed to collect data from the sample respondents in women Gram Panchayat member. We also conducted personal interviews with the women members of the Gram Panchayats. Multi-stage random sampling was applied in this study in order to select the Gram Panchayats. Data were also collected from the secondary sources like Government Reports, Government Documents, Books and other published literatures.

As it is quite impossible to study the Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj and Decentralized Planning of South 24 Parganas districts in West Bengal, so I have selected only one Block, i.e., Sagar Block where there are 9 Gram Panchayats (GPs). Out of 9 GPs, only 4

GPs i.e. Gangasagar, Dhablat, Rudranagar and Muriganga-II have been selected on random basis. Again, from these 4 GPs, I have selected 20 sample Women Panchayat members, 5 samples of women Panchayat members from each GP. Here, random sampling method has been adopted for the selection of women Panchayat members. The study “An analysis the women's Participation in political.

**Result and Discussion:**

**Table 1: Women representation in three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institution**

Name of Panchayat Institution	Total seat	Women	% of Women	Mane	% of Mane
South 24 PGS Zilla-Parishad	81	43	53.09%	38	46.91%
Sagar Panchayat Samiti	25	12	48%	13	52%
Dhablat GP	20	11	55%	9	45%
Dhaspara Sumatinagar I GP	15	7	46.67%	8	53.33%
Dhaspara Sumatinagar II GP	15	7	46.67%	8	53.33%
Gangasagar GP	22	11	50%	11	50%
Ghoramara GP	5	2	40%	3	60%
Muriganga I GP	14	8	57.14%	6	42.86%
Muriganga II GP	14	7	50%	7	50%
Ramkarchar GP	22	11	50%	11	50%
Rudranagar GP	20	10	50%	10	50%

**Source:** West Bengal Election Commission 2013, Panchayat election result.

Now it is already 22 years past after the 73rd amendments. This state has also witnessed the election of 2013. Present scenario of women participation in Panchayati Raj Institution of the study area has been depicted in the following table 1. This table shows that more than (40 per cent) to (50 per cent) seats are occupied by the women in Zilla- Parishad, Panchyat Samiti and gram panchayat level of study area. Women seats are also high in Muriganga-I GP (57.14 per cent). It has been seen from this table that on an average in the South 24 PGS district (53.09 per cent) seats at Zilla Parishad level, (48 per cent) at Sagar Panchayat Samiti level and (50.34 per cent) seats at all Gram Panchayat level in Sagar block have been participated of women. Our study Gram Panchayats women participation rate in last Panchayat election was (51.25 per cent) on average, i.e, Gangasagar (50 per cent), Dhablat (55 per cent), Rudranagar (50 per cent) and Muriganga-II (50 per cent).

**■ Profile of Women Members in Gram Panchayat:**

According to the table 2 out of the 20 women members 10 belong to age group varying from 30-39, 6 belong to middle age group 40-49 and one responds was old 50 above year. It may be stated here that age factor is off course a significant factor but it show that sample women members maximum age group in 30-49 years it reveals that middle age group can take more responsibility in Panchayat and also at home both together. Only one member are three times elected and rest of others in first time in participate in Panchayat election and also

elected for the member of the Panchayat. All sample women member are married. Out of 20 sample women members 10 members come from SC community, 6 members belongs in general casts and rest of 4 sample women members come from OBC community. Only one women member in sample belongs in minority community (OBC). Out of 20 sample women members all are literate. 7 members educated in primary and upper primary level, 6 sample women members ten pass, 5 sample women members Higher Secondary (HS) pass and only 2 having graduate degree. Maximum sample women member are house wife only few of them engage in small handy craft work.

**Table 2: Respondents of women members in GP sample profile (N=20):**

Age(in years)	No.	Gene ral	Category			Marital status			Education					
			OBC	SC	ST	Widow	Married	Not	Illiterate	Primary / Upper primary	Secondar y/MD	HS	Graduate /Masters	
<30	3	-	1	2	-	-	3	-	-	-	1	2	-	-
30-39	10	2	2	6	-	-	10	-	-	-	4	1	3	2
40-49	6	3	1	2	-	-	6	-	-	-	2	2	2	-
50 & Above	1	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-

Source: Primary survey data.

■ **Reason for Participation of Panchayat Elections:** According to the table 3 majorities of 18 (90 per cent) women members participate in Panchayat election for wished to help people in the society and to work for the development of the village and villagers. 14 (70 per cent) of women members mentioned that they had pressure from the family especially from their husbands. 3 (15 per cent) women members say that entered Panchayat to hold power and to prove their identity; political parties also motivated 11 (55 per cent) women members in participation in Panchayat elections.

**Table 3: Reason for Participation of Panchayat Elections:**

Reason	No. of Women member	% of Women members
Hold power	3	15%
Help to the people in society	18	90%
Pressure from family members/ Husband	14	70%
Pressure/Motivated from political party	11	55%

Source: Primary survey data, \* Multiple response

■ **Meetings attended by Women members:** To assess their participation, the women members have been quizzed whether they attend the meetings regularly. It needs to be observed as shown in the table 4, that out of 20 women members, 13 (65 per cent) women say that they attend the meeting regularly, with only 5 (25 per cent) saying they are irregular in their attendance. But a significant 2 (10 per cent) women say they have not attended any meeting at all. Most of the cause of regularly not attended in the meeting was women members engage in household work, time given in children and some of women members say that not informed timely.

**Table 4: Meetings attended by Women members in Panchayat (N=20):**

Response	No. of women	% of women
Regularly	13	65%
Sometimes	5	25%
Not attended	2	10%

Source: Primary survey data

■ **Problems faced by Women Members in Panchayat:** The table 5 shows that problems faced by women members in Panchayat out 20 sample 13 (65 per cent) say that they face problems from lack of knowledge of paper works like financial matter it seen in low educated groups of women Panchayat members. 8 (40 per cent) women member say that face problem in managing of work. Whereas 6 (30 per cent) respondents argued non cooperation that they primarily face on the basis of gender discrimination. 2 (10 per cent) respondent also revealed that even the female colleagues for their personal views and differences did not support her.

**Table 5: Problems faced by Women Members in Panchayat:**

Problems	No of Women members	% of Women members
Lack of knowledge managing skill	8	40%
Lack of knowledge of paper works / Financial	13	65%
Interfere	6	30%
Lack of support from male members in Panchayat	6	30%
Lack of support from female members in Panchayat	2	10%

Source: Primary survey data, \* Multiple responses

■ **Ways to overcome constraints problems:** Women member are thinks different way to overcome constraints problems. Majority of 18 (90 per cent) women members believe that they regularly attended the meetings to keep themselves updated. 12 (60 per cent) respondents revealed that they participate in discussion at village level it helps to overcome constraints problem. 11 (55 per cent) women member reported that they motivated the Panchayat members to inculcate the interest for a positive approach in the overall interests of the area. 5 (25% per cent) women member say that building their confidence through the proper training and only 2 (10 per cent) respondents reported that they built confidence among themselves to face such types of situations and impose off matters event difference in a positive manner.

**Table 6: Ways to overcome constraints problems:**

To overcome constraints issues	No of Women members	% of Women members
Regularly attended all meetings	18	90%
Participated in discussion at village level	12	60%
Building confidence through training	5	25%
By motivating Panchayat members	11	55%
Avoid the situation	2	10%

Source: Primary survey data, \*Multiple responses

■ **Women participation in decision making in Panchayat:**

**Table 7: Decisions taken by women in Panchayats (N=20):**

No. of women			% of women			
Response	Yes	No	Lack of Knowledge	Views are not cleared	Interferers by male member	Never seen agenda of meetings
No of Women members	11	9	3	5	6	2
% of Women members	55%	45%	15%	25%	30%	10%

Source: Primary survey data, \*Multiple responses in case of no decision taken

Above table 7 it show that 11 (55 per cent) women member say that they take part in decision making process but we seen in 9 (45 per cent) sample women members still not given decision any matter in Panchayat like financial, social development issues etc. 6 women members say that only male members right to take decision and they also say that male members not given any preference their decision. 5 (25 per cent) women member reported that their view in administrative mater it not so cleared. We saw it in low educated women member groups. 3 (15 per cent) women members say that not so much knowledge about the Panchayat works and they also say that other political party member or family member solve their woks. Only 2 (10 per cent) women also say that they never seen agenda of meetings that ways they cannot participate in decision making process.

■ **Women Members Gains from Participation:**

The anticipated gain from the participation plays a very significant role in determining whether members would like to participate in the Panchayat activities or not. Regarding the gain after elected in the Panchayat member holding the present position, following are response from the women members as given in table 8.

**Table 8: Women gains from participation in Panchayat:**

Type of Issue	No of Women member	% of Women member
Change in attitude in public	14	70%
Satisfaction	10	50%
Respect/Popularity	18	90%

Increase in awareness/ Knowledge	12	60%
Confidence/ Communication Skills	5	25%
Road to next elections	4	20%
Ttension	17	85%
No advantage	15	75%

Source: Primary survey data, \* Multiple responses

**Conclusion:** We find out our study maximum women are elected in first time in Panchayat. Half of our samples women members are belong from SC community. It seen that most of women members' education level more than ten class pass. Majority women participate in election due to help to the people in society and also most of say that participate in election pressurized by her husband, family member and political party member. More than half of women members face problem in official paper work most of cases it seen in financial mater. Majority of women members believes that overcome the constraints problem it more participation regularly attend the meeting and participation in village level discussion. We also seen most of women still not participation in decision making process in Panchayat due to male members are not so give preference her opinion in decision making process in Gram Panchayat works. After participation in Panchayat election most of women members are thinks that it increased their respect/popularity in villagers, it also helps to change their attitude toward the people of the village and helps to increased awareness and knowledge in socio, economic and political issues.

The study also reveals that women are interested to participate in politics. Today women are not engage only household work they had participate many development works in their sectors. However, as found that lacked of knowledge to full extent and proper awareness or training is provide then they can more effectively participate in the Gram Panchayat development activities.

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