RESEARCH ARTICLE

RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF GRAM PANCHAYATS IN UTTAR DINAJPUR DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL

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Manuscript Info

Abstract

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The paper attempts to analyze the praxis of women empowerment and women's political participation of some Gram Panchayats in Uttar Dinajpur rural areas. In present times, the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of the 21st century because of their right to participate in political processes which also impact their family and in turn the society. Many countries are attempting to increase women's political participation and leadership in civil society and now political parties want more women to join in political activities. Women around the world are still largely absent from national and local decision-making procedures. Globally about 20% of women participate in political activities, for women it is very difficult to participate in the civic and political life of their countries due to lack of support and gender discrimination. Strengthening women's rights and addressing obstacles to political participation are critical to achieving gender justice, equality, and women empowerment.

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Introduction:-
Empowerment refers to increasing the economic, political, social, educational, gender, the spiritual strength of an entity. The subject of empowerment of women has become a burning issue all over the world including India for the last few decades. Inequalities between men and women and discrimination against women have also been an age-old issue all over the world. Empowerment focuses on mobilizing the self-help of the poor and needy. If we look back to our society we can observe very few women who took active participation in local politics due to the limitations of being a woman in a patriarchal society. (Seth, Mira,2001) Women did not raise their voices in the family and found it difficult to speak with courage in front of their male colleagues. It is mentioned that though women are very much active in their household job they have a negligible involvement in the decision-making process in the local politics on account of their low socio-economic status. (Ahuja, Ram,1992)

The participation of women in Indian politics was very low before the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment act. These acts are landmark legislation for women in the history of local government. Since the enactment of the law, some rural and urban women have willingly or unwillingly entered local bodies. Local bodies are at the entry-level of political participation where women can enter political activities as the cost of election campaigns are very low and it provides an opportunity for the women to participate in political actions. Some get help and support from their male members and friends.

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Need for Women Empowerment in India:
Indian tradition has provided a prominent position for women in society. This process started during the Neolithic period. At this stage, women were found to contribute maximum benefits to the development of human society. Their role was never ignored or was placed in an inferior position.

This practice continued up to the Vedic period when women were given enough education facilities. Gradually the scenario started to change and women were not given basic education and other facilities that may empower them. The status of women in India particularly in rural areas is relatively low and hence, the issue of empowering women. According to feminist thinkers, "Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women from any discrimination. (Smith, Barbara,1982) Due to prevalent social customs, the majority of the female population in rural areas are not empowered and their contribution is understated. This is mainly because in agriculture and animal care women's contribution is quite substantial but not reflected in their economic earnings. Of the total workforce, women constitute almost half of the population, perform nearly 2/3 of the work hours (both domestic and outside work), receive $1/10^{th}$ of the world's income and own less than $1/100^{th}$ of the world property. The existing studies show that women are relatively less healthy than men though they belong to the same class. They constitute less than $1/17^{th}$ of the administrators and managers in developing countries. Only 10% of seats in the world parliament and 6% in the national cabinet are held by women and therefore for the uplift of any society, women need to be empowered. (Akhatar Majeed,2005)

Women and Political Participation in India:
Political Participation is the essential need of a democratic political system like India. A successful democracy mainly depends on the extent to which equal, positive, and actual participation is provided by the political system to all its citizens. As women comprise about half of the population, the woman section requires due attention equally in the political system with an equal share. Woman's active participation in political affairs in a democracy is a crucial and urgent need because it provides legitimacy to the system. Democracy cannot be successful if women citizen lacks equal opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. They are to be an equal partner of the developmental programs. (Noran D. Palmer,1976) Women's participation in the local governments' institutions has been considered essential in promoting women's awareness and development at the local level as well as training them for the upper level. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10th December 1948, its Article 2, proclaimed that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms without distinction of sex." It is a clarion call for the issue of women empowerment. The mobilization of women in large numbers reduced the bondage of tradition and encouraged them to develop a move on the wider socio-economic problems. (Raj, Kumar,2000)

Some responsibilities to empower women in society are:
1. To provide for basic minimum needs like nutrition, health, sanitation, and housing, etc.
2. Changes in women's mobility and social interaction, control over decision making, labor pattern, education, employment, and career development.
3. To create awareness about their rights and duties as a citizen.
4. The society's attitudinal change to stop any type of discrimination against women.

Objectives of the Study:
The objectives of this paper are to examine how the concept of empowerment is directly related to social, political, and economic factors, to find out how the women of Uttar Dinajpur, both literate and illiterate, are aware of their powers, rights and duties and to evaluate whether women empowerment has helped to develop and advance in social, political and economic spheres and activities.

The hypothesis of the case study:
1. A literate woman is more empowered than illiterate women.
2. Women from privileged sections are better empowered than the women of the non-privilege group.
3. Women are more empowered when they have economic independence.
4. Empowered women participate in political activities.

Collection of the Data:

Age-group	Gen	SC	ST	OBC
18-30	77	08	07	10
31-40	109	06	09	19
41-50	58	04	04	10
51-75	30	03	02	04
Total	274	21	22	43

To refute or validate the hypotheses the researcher collected data through survey research. Primary data was collected through a survey of literate, semi-literate, and non-literate women in Uttar Dinajpur. To refute or validate the hypotheses the researcher collected data through survey research. Primary data was collected through a survey of literate, semi-literate, and non-literate women Analysis

The following tables (Table 1 to Table 6) provide the background of the respondents:
Table 1:-Age groups of respondents.

Age-group	Respondents	%
18-30	102	28
31-40	143	40
41-50	76	21
50-75	39	11

Source: A field survey in the selected area.

Table 2:- Social background of women respondents.

Age-group	Gen	SC	ST	OBC
18-30	77	08	07	10
31-40	109	06	09	19
41-50	58	04	04	10
51-75	30	03	02	04
Total	274	21	22	43
Age-group	Gen	SC	ST	OBC
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41-50	58	04	04	10
51-75	30	03	02	04
Total	274	21	22	43

Source: A field survey in the selected area

Table 3:- Marital status of respondents.

Age-group	Married	Unmarried	Widow	Divorcee
18-30	68	28	03	03
31-40	130	05	05	03
41-50	69	02	03	02
51-75	22	01	14	02
Total	289	36	25	10

Source: A field survey in the selected area

Table 4:- Educational Background.

Age-group	Illiterate	Up to 5th	Up to 10th	Graduate	Post Graduate/PhD	Other
18-30	06	14	52	26	02	02
31-40	08	11	86	34	01	03
41-50	08	25	26	16	-	01
50-75	15	14	05	05	-	02

| Total | 37 | 64 | 169 | 79 | 03 | 08 |

Source: A field survey in the selected area

Table 5:- Economic Background.

Age	<5000 5000	10000	Above Others group 10000 20000	Age	⬛
18-30	58	22	19		11
31-40	61	29	24	05	25
41-50	22	08	05	04	26
50-75	11	04	04	02	18
Total	152	63	52	13	80

Source: A field survey in the selected area

Table 6:- Area-wise distribution of respondents.

Age-group	Rampur	Sherpur	Bindole	Mahipur	Bhatol
18-30	13	13	34	28	14
31-40	27	21	63	17	15
41-50	09	20	26	12	09
50-75	04	06	17	08	04
Total	53	60	140	65	42

Source: A field survey in the selected area

It can be observed from the above tables that the 360 respondents represent different age-group, coming from varied socio, economic and educational backgrounds, and the sample has been drawn from different areas of villages, adequately reflecting the demographic profile of the Gram Panchayats.

Table 7:- Empowerment level in women.

	Respondents	%
Employment	76	21
Independence & Freedom	55	15
Decision making in family & workplace	182	51
To do anything	47	13

Source: A field survey in the selected area.

To the question of what empowerment means to the respondents, the responses are as shown in Table 7. Women consider decision-making in both family and workplace as a primary feature of empowerment.

Table 8:- Factors contributing to the women empowerment.

	Respondents	%
Education	109	30
Work Experience in any field	57	16
Both of combination is literacy	172	48
None of these	22	06

Source: Field survey in five selected Gram Panchayats in Uttar Dinajpur District

To another question on what makes women empower, the majority of the respondents stated that both education and work experience (i.e., employment) empower them.

Table 9:- Different ways to empower women.

	Respondents	%
By giving training	191	53
Skill training	45	12

Vocational training	39	11
Personalized training	85	24

Source: Field survey in five selected Gram Panchayats in Uttar Dinajpur District

From Table 9 it is observed that respondents view training as a primary reason that helps the empowerment of women.

Table 10:- Views about the independence of empowered women.

	Response	**%**
a.Yes	202	56%
b.No	111	31%
c.Some	47	13%

Source: A field survey in the selected area

Table 10 is the response of women to the query of whether empowered women are independent and free in making decisions. While 56% of respondents say in the affirmative, the rest do not agree and have stated that education and employment ideally help empower women, in reality, it is not. It can be inferred from the above tables (Table 7 to Table 10) that education and employment help empower women and provides them independence and freedom to decide, both at home and workplace. However, it is also a social reality that empowerment through education and employment alone does not guarantee freedom and independence. It is, therefore, a reflection of social attitudes rooted in a patriarchal society.

The concept of Political Participation:
Political participation includes participating in such social and political activities that can influence others through persuasion, awareness programs, and of course by being members of political outfits like political parties and their related organizations. Women were elected representatives in urban or rural local bodies is one of the factors in political participation. The issues relating to women empowerment and political participation are varied and many and are not confined to having one-third elected representation in local bodies like panchayats or municipal authorities. (Patel, Vibhuti, 2009) Some of the issues to enable women to actively participate include the nature of participation, relative financial independence, support systems, awareness and literacy, the role of NGOs, perception about political empowerment, and above all accessibility to the political processes. The survey, through the questionnaire, was intended to find out the issues and problems of women empowerment in the political process, and the analysis that follows indicates the respondents' perception about the nature and scope of political participation and the challenges they face in the process.

Tables 11:- Is there a need for financial independence for political activity?.

	Respondents	**%**
Yes	173	48
No	89	25
May be	98	27

The above table shows 48% of respondents have said that financially independent women can undertake political activity, 25% believe that there is no need for women to be financially independent for political activity, 27% of respondents were unsure.

Table 12:- Do empowered women actively participate in political activity/process?.

	Respondents	**%**
Yes	120	33
No	166	46
May be	74	21

Source: A field survey in the selected area

From the above table, the view of respondents seems to be divided on the issue of empowered women's active participation in political activity.

Table 13:- Perception about women belonging to minorities group or backward classes actively participating in political activities.

	Respondents	%
Yes	86	24
No	227	63
May be	47	13

Source: A field survey in the selected area

The above table does not indicate whether women belonging to minorities group or backward classes indulge more in political activities. The majority shows less interest in political programs.

Table 14:- Literacy and political activity.

	Respondents	%
Yes	108	30
No	146	41
May be	106	29

Source: A field survey in the selected area

From the above table, it is clear that the respondents opine that literacy is not an important factor to participate in political activities. This approves a general perception that an individual need not be educated or even literate to be in politics.

Table 15:- Perception of women's awareness of political empowerment.

	Respondents	%
Yes	175	49
No	128	36
No opinion	57	15

Source: A field survey in selected aria

The above table shows that 49% of respondents feel women should be aware of political empowerment, 36% of respondents feel that there is no need to make women aware of political empowerment and 15% of respondents have no opinion.

Table 16:- Are empowered women generally successful in political activity?.

	Respondents	%
Yes	225	62
No	83	23
May be	52	15

Source: Field survey in five selected Gram Panchayats in Uttar Dinajpur District

The above table shows that the majority of respondents are of the view that empowered women are generally successful in political activities. They can pose equal opportunities with male members of the party.

Table 17:- Forms of women's involvement in political activity.

Activities	Respondents	%
Voting	300	83
Member of a political party	25	07
Propaganda	15	04
Creating awareness about the party	20	06

Source: A field survey in the selected area

The above table describes the nature and form of women's involvement in political activity. Women have shown their role in party politics in local aria.

Table 18:- Need for "Reserved seats" for women in elected bodies.

	Respondents	%
Yes	259	72
No	101	28

From the above table, the majority believe in the reservation of seats for women in elected figures. But 28% are not in support of reserved seats in the election for women.

Table 19:- Women and Party politics.

	Respondents	%
As Corporate	4	01
As a working member	21	06
No involvement with party politics	335	93

The above table states that only 7 % of the respondents are involved with political parties, either as corporate or as a member.

Table 20:- Perception about the role of women party workers and their functions.

	Respondents	%
Political consciousness	04	01
Knowledge of electoral politics	04	01
Participation in political party's functioning	16	04
Awareness of the political party's ideology	16	04
No opinion	320	90

Source: Field survey in five selected Gram Panchayats in Uttar Dinajpur District

The above table shows 01% of respondents think that political consciousness, as well as knowledge of the electoral procedure, is the main function, 04% of respondents think participating in political activities as well as awareness about the political ideology of the party are the main functions. It is observed that the majority of the respondents have no opinion as they are not involved in any system of political activity.

Interpretation of the data:
1. 68% of the respondents are in the age group of below 40, which reflects the demographic profile of the women respondents. This is also largely in conformity with the demographic profile of women in Surat, wherein nearly 65% are in the age group of below 45.
2. As regards the distribution of the respondents on the social background factor, no conclusive inference can be drawn since 23% of respondents belong to SC/ST/OBC categories. Many respondents did not wish to state their social background and hence were included under the general category
3. In terms of educational background, 28% of respondents can be considered as illiterate or having very poor literacy since they have studied only up to 5th standard.
4. The investigator classified the privileged and the non-privileged group based on educational and economic background – that is those whose income is above 10000 and whose educational background is 10th standard pass and above as privileged and the rest as a non-privileged group. Nearly 60% of respondents belong to the non-privileged group, which again is similar to the universe (of the study).
5. The sample selected from different areas of Uttar Dinajpur is almost similar to the population density of the city.
6. It is observed that the percentage of illiteracy is high in the case of SC/ST categories and low in the case of OBC and General categories. This reflects a lack of awareness and opportunities among the SC/ST categories. The education level among OBC and general categories of respondents show a relatively higher percentage. This helps to infer that awareness and opportunities regarding education have not percolated to the SC and ST categories of respondents.
7. However, the correlation between social status and economic background among different categories of respondents show negligible variation. This may be because economic opportunities are available for varied types of unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled labor, both in the formal as well as the informal sectors.

8. Respondents in the marginal category (income level between 5000 to 10000) earn to complement their family income for better economic benefits and those who are categorized as privileged group work and earn not to fulfill their basic needs but to show their independence, reflecting they are educationally and economically empowered.
9. The majority of the respondents consider empowerment as the right to make decisions, both in the family and at the workplace. This indicates assertiveness as an attribute of empowerment among the respondents.
10. Education, work experience, and formal training are identified as some of the ways to be empowered. The fact that only a small percentage of respondents believed that empowerment has nothing to do with the three aspects (i.e. education, experience, and training) indicates that empowerment of women needs to focus on these three core areas.

If social and economic empowerment serves as a base for women empowerment, the responses to political empowerment reveal that respondents have serious limitations on the issue of political activity and empowerment:
1. 48% of respondents feel that financial independence is needed for undertaking a political activity, though the majority of respondents do not participate in political activities. The majority of respondents feel that social work, performed through NGOs or similar such agencies, also constitute political activity.
2. Women belonging to Backward Classes and minorities do not actively take part in politics and there is a strong perception that literacy has very little to do with politics.
3. This also reflects the perception of the respondents about the contemporary political actors and activities.
4. The responses also indicate awareness about political empowerment is substantially high among the respondents, that non-privileged women need to actively participate in the political process to get empowered, and the view that political empowerment is a process in the social and political development of women.
5. Though they perceive that empowered women can be successful in political activity, the majority of them shy away from party politics, and their active political participation is restricted to voting in elections.
6. Respondents think that political consciousness, the knowledge of the electoral process as well as awareness about the political ideology of the party is the main political functions. It is found that the majority of respondents have no opinion regarding this matter as they are not involved in any form of political activity.
7. It is noticeable that on the matter of distribution of the reserved seats, 72% of respondents show their positive answer. 28% of respondents did not think the reservation of seats for women is needed in elected bodies.
8. The researcher also observed that major hindrances to active political participation come from the family itself and also due to preoccupation with domestic chores.
9. The foregoing analysis of the responses validates some of the assumptions earlier put forward as hypotheses but also negates other hypotheses.

Conclusion:-
Women's rights should not be ignored at any cost if we want development for all. But after seven decades of Independence, we are failing to establish gender quality in the realm of politics in India. The concept of empowerment is dependent on social, economic, and political factors. The study validates and repudiates many common perceptions about women empowerment in rural areas in Uttar Dinajpur District. Women who are literate and who belong to the privileged group are empowered is only partially true, because of their low political participation and empowerment. It is also noted that political activities in present times require financial support is validated by the fact that the respondents reflect financial independence and economic richness as an important factor in political empowerment. Although the Indian Constitution states women have equal status to men female section is powerless and is ignored inside and outside the home. The few women in leadership positions can not be able to encourage the entry of greater numbers of women in party politics. Therefore, it is an urgent need that we have to take active steps to enhance women's political participation for their all-round development.

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