

Political Reservation and Women Representation: Does this Make Women Really Empowered?

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Abstract: The efficacy of political reservation policy is to give the subjective class independent power and autonomy in the political field and to raise their voices and demand their rights. Literature documents, though there are reserved seats for women, many women do not come forward to contest the election because of patriarchal and traditional socio-cultural value system. Even in the political field also, women elected representatives face lots of problems. In this backdrop the paper examines the socio-economic and political factors influencing women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and their role across caste and gender. Data from 38 elected women representatives in Orissa were elicited through in-depth interviews. The findings indicate that majority of women members take up their political roles only when they can combine the family and political roles together, mostly after completing their reproductive roles. In female-dalit headed panchayats, women who have secured higher positions are usually better educated than the simple ward members as compared to male-headed panchayats.

Keywords: Education, Empowerment, Patriarchy, Political Reservation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal ideology dominates every sphere of life that restraints women's existence within domestic roles as wives and mothers. The male hegemony prevails in the decision-making processes both in private as well as public domains. The reason; women are in a state of subjection stems from traditional roles and men's interest in the stability of those roles [1].

The efficacy of political reservation policy is to give the subjective class independent power and autonomy in the political field and to raise their voices and demand their rights. The Indian Government has introduced quota-based political reservation system for women within the local governance to translate de jure right to de facto rights. But it is found that in most of the areas, though there are reserved seats for women, many women do not come forward to contest the election because of being illiterate and anticipating the problems of communicating the officials for addressing the grievances of her constituents [2]. One major limitation of the participation of women is that in India, rural society is still so structured that it is not easy for women to come outside the home [3]. Most of the women leave politics to men. They consider politics to be too 'dirty' and rough for women. Even in the political field also, women elected members face lots of problems i.e. inadequate functions, functionaries and funds made available to panchayats due to bureaucratic resistance and lack of political will, the overt or covert capture of

panchayat institutions by local elites and the lack of capacities of elected representatives and panchayat institutions to perform their constitutionally mandated task[4].

A review of the available literature gives an insight that empirical work on women's participation in PRIs available is based on very limited parameters, attendance being a commonly used indicator. There is an urgent need to develop more indicators for studying this issue, particularly when their participation is affected by various socio-cultural factors. In such a situation, it becomes necessary to study the concept from multi-dimensional perspectives.

2. OBJECTIVES

Keeping these issues in view, the present study embodies the following objectives:

1. To investigate the socio-economic and political factors influencing women's participation in PRIs.
2. To identify the factors affecting the role of elected women members in the political participation across caste and gender.

Methodology: The present study was conducted on the elected members of Kulailo and Maniabandhpanchayats (male-headed) of Athagarha block, Bangarasingha and Manpurpanchayats (female-headed) and Jodumu and Bentapadapanchayats (female-dalit headed) of Badamba block of Cuttack district (Odisha). For selection of respondents' purposive sampling technique was used. The sample size comprised of 38, out of which 15 elected members were from male-headed panchayats, 12 were from female-headed panchayats and 11 were from female-dalit headed panchayats. One male and one female group from each panchayat were selected for discussion on the performance of their elected women representatives. Total 6 groups were selected for focus group discussions (FGDs). Data were collected through interview method. An interview schedule for the elected women members and a FGD checklist for the public were developed. Both included closed as well as open-ended questions. Interview schedule for elected women members primarily aimed at collecting information from elected members with regard to the socio-economic profile such as age, caste, religion, education, marital status, occupation, land holding etc. and special focus on the participation of women representatives by various aspects such as their attendance in the meetings, average time invested in village matters, nature of issues handled, influence of family and change, their role in the development works conducted in the panchayats etc.

Broad Indicators for the Study

The research tools included broader themes and indicators such as:

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic profile of the respondents: The study reveals that the percentage of women elected members in the age group of 34-41 years is significantly higher in all these panchayats as compared to other age groups. This is an indication that women

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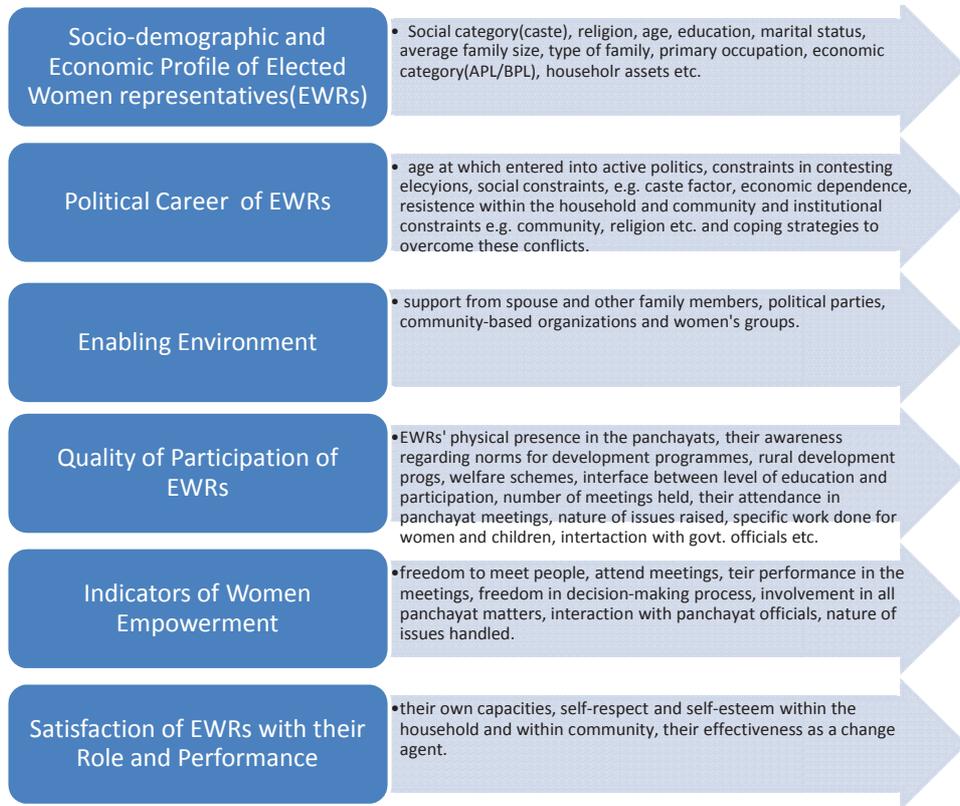


Fig 1: Indicators of the Study

generally take up political roles only when they can combine the family and political roles together, mostly after completing their reproductive roles. The absence of younger women in the local political structure is an indication of the continuing traditional attitude which tends to keep them away from the public sphere in rural communities. All the 38 respondents are married in all the panchayats. It shows that the chances for married women to enter into politics are greater than for unmarried women. The present study reveals that in spite of the fact that there is no reservation for people from Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Socially and Economically Backward Classes (SEBCs) in PRS of Orissa, women from Khandayat castes occupy the major portion followed by SEBCs and SCs because of the unwillingness of women from upper castes or Forward Castes (FCs) to enter into politics and the numerical strength of OBCs.

Regarding educational qualifications, it is observed that a major group of respondents have secondary educational qualifications i.e. 34.2 per cent followed by those with primary level (31.6%), higher secondary (13.2%), under graduates and mere illiterates or only they can sign (7.9%) and illiterates and graduates (2.6%). This is a positive reflection that more than half of women elected representatives are literates. An equal

proportion of better educated women members are observed in both male-headed and female-dalit headed panchayats but the difference is that those women who have occupied higher positions, like sarpanches or naib-sarpanches, are usually better educated than the simple ward members in female-dalit headed panchayats as compared to male-headed panchayats. Comparing educational qualification of women members with their husband's qualification, it is found that those women who are better educated; their husbands are also in a better position in educational status. The occupational status of the respondents' shows that majority of them are housewives in all three types of panchayats. It is a good indication that only less privileged women like housewives, daily laborers get the opportunity to participate in local governance politics. From the analysis of average monthly income and landholdings it is observed that women from landowning class and dominant castes do not come forward to enter into politics because of their rigid caste and social status values.

Influence of political factors on women's political participation: From the study it is analyzed that majority of the elected members (92.1%) contested elections because of the reservation for women in these constituencies while rest of the women respondents are from un-reserved constituencies i.e. those constituencies were not reserved for women. Again party affiliation reflects the nature of involvement of political parties at panchayat level and also PR member's attachment to the political parties. Affiliation to the political parties helps the members to get more funds from state level to the concerned villages, if the ruling party dominates at the village levels. The study shows that the regional political party, BijuJanata Dal (BJD) has the majority i.e. 42.1 per cent from both male-headed panchayats and female-headed panchayats which is the ruling party at state level followed by the Indian National Congress (INC) which has more women leaders in numbers in female-dalit headed panchayats.

Impact of political reservation: It is observed from the study that a larger proportion of women representatives, particularly from female-dalit headed panchayats have the positive response towards the interest in panchayat membership. They entered into politics due to women reservation. It is also found that women members, those who have interest in panchayat membership, majority of them are better educated i.e. secondary level of education. Regarding political experience, majority of the women members i.e. 97.4 per cent are fresher as due to the rotation, no one would re-elected from the same constituency and the continuing traditional political culture. About one-fourth of respondents, particularly from male-headed panchayat have come from politically active families as due to the pressure from family members and political parties. One thing is clear from the analysis that due to women reservation, most of family members of the respondents make them to contest elections to keep their power in the same constituency.

Role of women leaders in panchayat meetings: To assess elected member's participation, the women members have been asked whether they attend the meetings regularly. It is observed that majority of respondents attend meetings regularly, particularly in female-dalit headed panchayats while only a small number of young women members do not attend due to the prevailing social and cultural constraints, male dominance etc., among them 23.7 per cent of women member's husbands attend meetings on their behalf. It also reveals that the higher the educational level (secondary and higher secondary levels), more is the percentage of the respondents who attend the panchayat meetings regularly. It is clear from the analysis that women issues which are ignored by the male-headed

panchayats are being discussed in female-dalit headed panchayats. The data depict that in three-fourth cases, the respondents have complete freedom of expression in the panchayat meetings while a small proportion of respondents do not speak in the meetings, all of them belong to male-headed panchayats because the respondents feel hesitant to present their views in front of the male members and in some cases, the male members interfere while they present their views. As majority of elected women representatives from female and female-dalit headed panchayats do have the complete freedom of speech and expression in the meetings, 47.4 per cent of women respondents from female-dalit headed panchayats take decisions at their own level in panchayat meetings while 39.5 per cent of respondents have the negative view that they do not take decisions of their panchayats freely because they feel hesitant to participate in the discussions in the presence of male members present in the meetings, partly because they lack confidence and in some cases, the male members or local party leaders interfere in the discussion, of them majority belong to male-headed panchayats. Again a larger percentage of women members of female-dalit headed panchayats have much higher levels of political awareness regarding RD programmes and schemes.

Public opinion: The study deals with the attitude of the civil society towards the policy of reservation for women and the performance of elected women members in local self-government. Women from dalit woman headed panchayat devote more time for their work in the Panchayat. It is known that the dominant male discourse is a major obstacle for women to perform well in politics and it is found less in case of Jodumu (female-dalit) panchayat. Their family members particularly their husbands support a lot in their work because their husbands are also educated. One drawback is found that people from higher castes do not feel comfortable to approach a dalit woman sarpanch. In Bangarasinghapanchayat, 'proxy' representation is still present there. Because of the reservation, the sarpanch contested for election. The husband of the lady sarpanch manages all the panchayat matters. In case of Kulailopanchayat (male-headed panchayat), the public are not satisfied with their member's role. Most of the development activities of their panchayat are stuffed with corruption.

4. CONCLUSION

The study clearly brings out that the economic dependence on men and looking at them as their role models induces lack of confidence and inability to take decisions. Their lack of awareness especially on the political issues is of concern. Though education makes certain changes in the role of women in political decision-making process, it has not reached up to the point. There should be some mandals, associations of women members which will provide unity and organized way to work and women could learn skills and acquire confidence.

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