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## **Nature and effectiveness of women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions: a study in Jorhat district of Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*In the post 1993 phase women's participation seems to have improved in relative terms but still women representatives are to overcome a number of hindrances. The Act itself is considered as a significant step to make inroads to democratization process. It is a beginning which needs to be substantiated by changes in many other fields related to socio-economic, political and attitudinal values of our society. Various social restrictions still prevail in our society to lend support to the policy perspective provided by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act. The changes in PRIs structures over the years have certainly ensured higher visibility of women in grass root level democracy but whether that translates to real empowerment of women is subjected to corresponding changes in many others fields. Though the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act has created wide support for participatory democracy and space for political participation of women, queries and doubts have been raised regarding the level of their participation. In this regard it is quite relevant to study that after completion of 22 years of implementation of 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment Act whether it has brought the desired changes and leads to political empowerment of women. The present study attempts to examine the nature and effectiveness of women's participation at grass root level decision level making process.*

**Key Words: Women representatives, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Jorhat District, Participation.**

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**Introduction:** The term 'participation' is a widely used concept and interpreted differently by different scholars. It has been used in terms of involvement, interaction, influence, self-help, empowerment and self-reliance. The term participation has generally been conceived as the involvement of the people in the affairs which affect them. From the perspective of participatory development, equal participation of both men and women is quintessential. Development is a multidimensional concept and essential to satisfy the aspiration of the people. With the growth of development studies the concept of 'participation' of women in political process has received scholarly attention and it is conceived as a pre-requisite for the success of democracy as well as for development.

In India, women actively participated in public affairs in the early Vedic period. They were free to attend and visit public assemblies and social gatherings. However, in the subsequent period, slowly and gradually women's position declined and got confined to the four walls of family life. After independence, the constitution of India has laid down the foundation of participatory democracy and guaranteed the 'Right to Equality' to all its citizens. The government had also formed various social legislations and passed several acts for raising the status of women. However, women remain marginalized in political decision making bodies. The realization that women always

have been disadvantaged and marginalized from various development processes had led to a conscious effort among the development planners to provide equal space to women to participate in political process. Attempts had been made at national level to bring equality and to provide equal opportunity to both men and women to participate in decision making process. In 1993 the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act had brought a tremendous change towards the rural power structure through 33% reservation of seats for women in PRIs which was enhanced to 50% reservation and has been implemented in few states of India.

Assam has experimented with Panchayati Raj right from the dawn of independence. In post-independence period, a total of five Panchayati Raj Acts have been passed in Assam (1948, 1959, 1972, 1986, and 1994). Assam has introduced three tier (village level, block level, district level) Panchayati Raj System with the provision of 33% reservation of seats for women under the Assam Panchayati Raj Act 1994, in conformity with the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act. At present there are 21 Zilla Parishads, 219 Anchalik Panchayats and 2487 Gaon Panchayats functioning in Assam. Under this new system three elections of PRIs have been held in Assam in 2001, 2007 and 2013. Jorhat district is located in the north-eastern part of Assam. The sex ratio of the district is 913 per 1000 men. Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jorhat district comprises of one Zilla Parishad i.e., Jorhat Zilla Parishad (JZP), 8 Anchalik Panchayats (AP) and 111 Gaon Panchayats (GP). So far in Jorhat district three Panchayat elections have been held. The present work is an endeavor to analyze the nature and effectiveness of participation of women representatives in terms of their role at the various levels of Panchayati Raj Structure in Jorhat district.

**Data and Methodology:** In this study analytical method has been followed. Data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is comprised of interview schedule, observation schedule, the Reports of Balawant Rai Mehta Committee, Ashok Mehta Committee, 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment Act of Indian Constitution, Panchayati Raj Acts in Assam, official records of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development Department of Assam, State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD) of Assam, and official documents of Jorhat Zilla Parishad and selected Anchalik Panchayats and Gaon Panchayats. Secondary data consist of books, articles, journals, seminar papers, newspaper clippings and unpublished thesis and dissertation. The statistical methods like percentage, average etc. are applied to analyse the data collected for the study.

The field of the study is Jorhat district. The study focuses on the participation of women at all the three tiers of the Panchayati Raj structure which are Jorhat Zilla Parishad (JZP) at district level, two selected Anchalik Panchayats (AP) namely Jorhat Central Anchalik Panchayat and Titabor Anchalik Panchayat at block level and ten Gaon Panchayats (GP) five each from the above mentioned Anchalik Panchayats selected through purposive sampling method at village level. The selected GPs are Madhya Namoni Charaibahi G.P, Uttar Garmur Bagisa G.P, Katani G.P, Uttar Khongia G.P, Madhya Khongia G.P, Rajabhar G.P, Kachukhat G.P, Melamati G.P., Bekajan G.P., Madhapur G.P. The sample size comprised 88 which have included 12 ZP, 22 AP and 54 GP women representatives.

**Major findings:** Attending meetings is very essential and crucial for the representatives of the PRIs.

**Table-1.1**  
**Attendance in meetings**

Responses	Women representatives			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
Attend all meetings	10	17	26	53 (60.2%)
Absence in more than three meetings	2	5	22	29 (33%)
Absence in more than six meetings	0	0	6	6 (6.8%)
Total	12	22	54	88

A simple analysis of data presented in Table-1.1 reveals that 60.2% women have never missed a single meeting. The representatives have opined that attending meetings is essential as they get information on many issues. It has been observed that 6.8% women representatives are not regular in attending meetings and they have missed more than six meetings. It is found that overloaded household responsibilities and sickness are some of the causes of their irregularity in statutory meetings. It is found in the study that 'proxy' attendance is not granted in PRIs in Jorhat district. If women are absent in meetings in behalf of them their husbands or male family representatives are not permitted to attend the same. It is found that in all the three tiers of PRIs in Jorhat district representatives get prior information of meetings along with proceeding and the subject of discussion. Most of the women representatives of ZP and AP come to the meetings with prior preparation. However, some of the women representatives are found totally uninterested in proceeding preparation. At the GP level most of the women representatives do not have proceeding preparation for any meeting. Thus they fail to provide impressive opinions in meetings.

Taking part in debate and discussion is an essential component of participation in representative institutions.

**Table-1.2**  
**Participation in debate and discussion**

Participating in debate	Women			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
Always raise their voices	12	11	39	62 (70.4%)
Try to raise voices	0	8	15	23 (26.1%)
Do not raise voices	0	3	8	11 (12.5%)
Total	12	22	54	88 (100%)

It is found that majority of the women representatives (70.4%) actively participate in meetings and raise their voice and opinions. In Jorhat district women equally participate in decision making process. However the process of decision making is not similar in all the three tiers. In most of the earlier studies gender disparity was found a major hindrance for women to participate in decision making process. In this present study it is viewed that women are not facing the problem of gender disparity. The reasons may be varied. Firstly, the numerical strength of the women representatives is equivalent to the male representatives in the selected panchayats. Secondly most of the representatives belong to same party that is the state ruling party of the state (INC). Thus same party affiliation encourages the women to participate actively in debate and discussions. Thirdly, the presidents provide equal opportunity to all the representatives to express their views and argue in meetings. However at the GP level it has been observed that the GP president is the most important

figure in leading and facilitating the decision making process. The presidents play a dominant role in decision making and sometime they do not consult with the representatives.

One of the most important objectives of Panchayati raj is rural development. The representatives have the great responsibility to implement the rural development schemes.

**Table No-1.3**  
**Participation in implementing development programmes**

Responses	Women			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
Participate in all the stages	8	13	10	31 (35.2%)
Participate in planning	0	4	9	13 (14.8%)
Participate in supervising	4	5	16	25 (28.4%)
Do not directly involve	0	0	19	19 (21.6%)
Total	12	22	54	88

Enquiring about the nature and participation of woman representatives in implementation of different developmental programmes, it is observed that 35.2% women member participate in all stages of implementation development programmes including planning, supervising, monitoring and evaluating programme benefits while 14.8% women representatives participate only in planning and 28.4% women representatives involve themselves in supervising the development programmes. However, in this regard the role of the GP representatives is found passive and insignificant. In this study it is found that 21.6% women GP representatives do not involve in programme implementation. While enquiring about the problems related to programme implementation most of the women representatives held that delay in releasing of funds in favour of allotted schemes creates problems for them. A large proportion of women representatives are found not getting proper and timely information from different government departments. They face problems in identification of beneficiaries to be proposed for covering under various development programmes.

The time spent by the women representatives in village affairs is indicator which signifies women's participation in PRIs.

**Table No-1.4**  
**Average time spent by the representatives in village activities**

Time	Women			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
1-3 hours	2	3	40	45 (51.1%)
4- 5 hours	4	10	9	23 (26.1%)
More than 5 hours	6	9	5	20 (22.8%)
Total	12	22	54	88 (100%)

From the study, it has become clear that majority of the women representatives (51.1%) are found investing one to two hours per day in Panchayat work, while 26.1% invest four to five hours and only 22.8% representatives invest more than five hours. It is observed as compared to ZP and AP representatives at the GP level women spend minimum time in village activity. Thus the data clearly depicts that women spend less time in village activity. This is because women cannot ignore their regular household duties though they are elected to PRIs.

Visiting constituency is an important chore for elected representatives of any representative institution whether it is a grass root level institution or a higher level political institution as because it brings them closer to the people.

**Table-1.5**  
**Frequency of visiting constituencies**

Responses	Women			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
Regularly (once in a week)	2	5	10	17 (19.3%)
Rarely	10	17	35	62 (70.5%)
Do not visit	0	0	9	9 (10.2%)
Total	12	22	54	88

The data depicted in the table No 1.5 reveals that majority of the women representatives 62 (70.5%) don't frequently visit the villages and meet the people. However, it does not mean that they are not interested in redressing the grievances of the voters. It has been observed that all the women representatives had opened up offices in their homes so that people could contact them. In this way they have found an arrangement avoided going to distances, save time and energy and perform the dual functions without getting hampered. Very often people visit and most of them come with problems regarding inadequacy of drinking water, bad conditions of rural roads and bridges, inadequate medical facilities and shortage of electricity.

**Table-1.6**  
**Mode of redressing the problems of people**

Mode of dealing with complaints	Women			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
Direct people to the proper authority	4	6	40	50 (56.8%)
Personally contacting the authorities	8	16	14	38 (43.2%)
Total	12	22	54	88

It has been found that for redressing the grievances of people, majority of the women representatives (56.8%) guide the people to go to the proper authority to get the work done. However 43.2% women representatives directly contact the concerned authorities in behalf of the people to get the work done. They visit the authorities in their offices or get in touch with them by telephone wherever possible, discuss the issue with them to take necessary action. Majority of the women representatives have responded that due to departmental rigidity works were not completed in proper time which create dissatisfaction among the people.

One of the important explanations for giving representation to women was the fact that women could better represent women as a group.

**Table-1.7**  
**Discussion on women's issues**

Mode of Discussion	Women			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
Rarely held	3	7	41	51 (58.9%)
Frequently held	5	3	4	12 (13.7%)
No discussion on women	4	12	9	25 (28.4%)
Total	12	22	54	88

In response to the question as to whether or not the 'interests of women' as a subject, figures in the various meetings of panchayats, 51 (58.9%) women representatives opine that exclusive discussions on women issues are rarely held. 13.7% are in the opinion that women issues are a part of varied integrated rural development programs which are frequently discussed in the meetings. However, 28.4% women express that there is no need to discuss the women's issue as a separate subject because it automatically finds inclusion in the discussion on general development. Women's interests are not adequately represented because of women themselves fail to take initiatives in this regard.

The anticipated gains from the participation play a very significant role in determining whether representatives would like to participate in Panchayati Raj activities or not.

**Table-1.8**  
**Gains from participating in PR activities**

Responses	Women			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
Confidence	6	10	36	52(59.1%)
Own identity	3	4	2	9 (10.2%)
Satisfaction/ serve to people	3	8	10	21(23.9%)
Extra burden	0	0	6	6 (6.8%)
Total	12	22	54	88

The above table shows that increase in the confidence level is an important gain for the women representatives as stated by majority of them (59.1%). During the course of interview 9 (10.2%) women said that representativeness of PRIs has given them an identity while 2 (12.5%) women are getting the opportunity to serve the people which brings a kind of satisfaction to them. However, the rest 6.8% women representatives are in the opinion that representative ship of PRIs has brought extra responsibility and extra burden to them.

Future political ambition is an important attribute to understand whether the women representatives are interested in holding the present position and whether they are concerned with their political career.

**Table No-1.9**  
**Future political ambition of the representatives**

Responses	Women			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
Yes	8	16	38	62 (70.5%)
No	4	6	16	26 (29.5%)
Total	12	22	54	88 (100%)

As depicted in the above table it is found that women representatives regard their representativeness as an avenue to be in position and power and enjoy privilege. 70.5% women representatives want to hold on their position. Some of them want to take part at the higher levels of decision making bodies. This trend shows that a healthy development is taking place among the women representatives.. However, 29.5% women are found who are not interested to contest in the next election due to their inability of adjusting family life and public life.

**Conclusion:** The study reveals that though some of the women representatives are active, articulate while there are few others who are passive and do not place their views much. The analysis reveals that their participation as elected Representatives is itself a new experience and they depend quite often on the officials and administrative staff. Women Representatives do not invest enough time for village affairs. Though the numerical strength of the women representatives have increased they have not been able to affect decision making substantially. The fact that issues related to women rarely find importance indicates this position. The present study indicates that women's role in public domain did not led to lessening and sharing of domestic burden. They have to bear both their domestic responsibilities and public duties. The burden of dual responsibilities leave another major observation which has emerged from the study is that to bring any change in desired goal of social change by women of Panchayati Raj needs changes all around. Thus the study finds that on the one hand political awareness, education, training and increasing level of confidence have contributed towards women's participation on the other hand societal and cultural constraints, economic dependence on male, lack of local financial resources, interference of political parties, lack of support from women's groups hampering women's participation to a great extent.

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