

Political Participation of Women at Local Level in Odisha

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ABSTRACT

Democracy is a form of government which hails for the equality of all sections of people including women. But the ground reality in India is different than the ideal situation as described in democracy of India. The women are more visible excluded from the political scenario and affairs of the country. In spite of many policies meant to exist for women participation in politics, the political participation of women at the local level is abysmally low in Odisha. In comparison to men, the participation of women in two key areas like policy formulation and decision-making processes is very low. The existing principle of gender equality endorsed by the constitution of India is yet to be translated fully into reality. The women of Odisha are proportionally underrepresented in the political forum at national and state level. The Indian society has not been successful to denounce discrimination against women on the basis of stereotypical gender norms and roles and Odisha is not an exception to it. The present study is an exploration of the political participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in western Odisha. The findings of the study indicate that the participation level of women in Political scenario is low in Odisha and hence there is a greater need for encouragement and freedom to be provided to women to ensure more participation.

Keywords: gender equality, empowerment, people's participation, good governance.

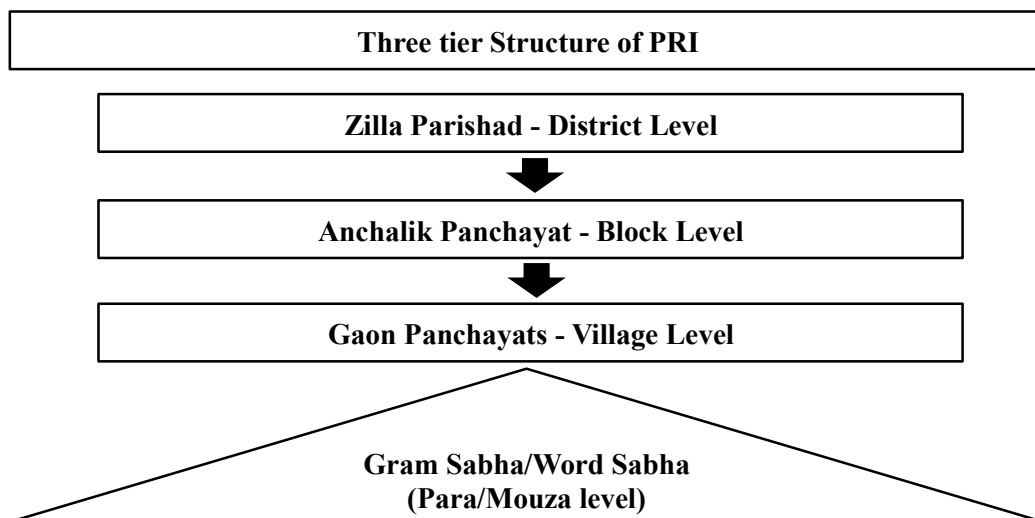
INTRODUCTION:

Women have been playing significant roles in our society from time immemorial. However, the roles played by women are not well recognized due to the patriarchal nature of our society. Men are considered to be a stronger generation of society. In spite of different rules and regulations, awareness programmes by the government, women are not given proper opportunities to enjoy life at par with men. They are discriminated against and marginalized in the socio-economic, cultural, educational and political phenomena of their life. It is generally seen that women possess a lower status in comparison to men concerning power in every spheres of life. Though they contribute to the household economy at different points of time, they are allowed to decide neither about neither the expenditure nor the investment. There are circumstances in which they have no money at their disposal. When there is a requirement, they have to beg before the male members of the family for money. There is a close association between the economic empowerment and political empowerment of the women. To make it meaningful and effective, it is necessary to have equal treatment towards women not only in political life but also in every sphere of life which should start from the local level. The democratic institutions of the local level play a pivotal role in encouraging and providing training to women as to how to take part in the decision-making process. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is a historic step taken by the government of India which brought novel and revolutionary steps to accomplish the purpose of ensuring political participation of women by way of providing reservation of seats in panchayats. This has resulted into many positive political repercussions on the political process of rural India including Odisha.

Women's political participation at the local level has gained momentum in due course of time throughout India to strengthen local self-governance. To incorporate the interest of women into the governance, it is essential to ensure the political participation of women in decision-making process. Till now, the existing structure of governance has failed to provide ample opportunities for adequate participation of women. Hence it is essential to take steps towards creating gender equality and gender-sensitive policies. Keeping in mind the different needs and perspectives of women, steps should be taken to involve women in policy and decision-making processes. According to the report of (Hunger Project, 2003), the 73rd Amendment is a threat to the monopoly of power enjoyed by the social and political elite's in Panchayats by bringing the most powerless members into the Panchayats. The changing nature of leadership by women is highly appreciable which can be visible in the forms of honesty, openness, patience, collective support, inclusion and accountability. They have become the key change agents for a new future for India. In the politics of every state of India Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) have been assigned with the responsibility of ensuring good governance in rural areas. The presence of women representatives in Gram Panchayats is an impact of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The Act advocates for reservation of one third seats for women. The Political inclusion of women is a welcoming step which paves the way for other women to enter into diverse professions. The women are entering into new professions which were considered previously unsuitable for them. The stereotypes of women's roles in society and public space are gradually being broken. The women have gradually been becoming successful in making positive difference in the lives of others and hence people are gaining confidence in women as good public administrators and local government representatives. Many young girls are entering into civil services and securing good positions. The sincerity and commitment of women to their duties has started being acknowledged by the broader society. The presence of a significant proportion of women in local-level politics can be seen as a result of reserving seats for women. However, there are still women in the grassroots level who are unable to participate properly in the political sphere of their life due to many socio-cultural restrictions. The real question is to what extent these political representatives have been successful in enjoying their true power. In many parts of Odisha, it is seen that the real power is enjoyed by the male member of the family and the woman representative just put her signature to maintain the official decorum. They are not provided full freedom and encouragement to take part in the political process.

STRUCTURE AND PROVISION OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION:

The origin of Panchayati Raj in India can be traced to the Community development Programme initiated in 1952. The Panchayati Raj Institutions were established in India with a lot of excitement and euphoria based on the recommendations of the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee.



Article 243 D introduced through the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution reads as under:

- (1) Seats shall be reserved for (a) the Scheduled Castes; and (b) the Scheduled Tribes, in every Panchayat
- (2) Not less than one-third of the total number of seats reserved under clause (1) shall be reserved for women belonging to Scheduled Castes or, as the case, may be, the Scheduled Tribes.

(3) Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.

(4) The offices of the Chairpersons in the Panchayats at the village or any other level shall be reserved for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and women in such manner as the Legislature of a State may, by law, provide

(5) The reservation of seats under clauses (1) and (2) and the reservation of offices of Chairpersons (other than the reservation for women) under clause (4) shall cease to affect the expiration of the period specified in article 334.

(6) Nothing in this part shall prevent the legislature of a State from making any provision for reservation of seats in any Panchayat or offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at any level in favour of backward class of citizens”

AREA OF STUDY:

Sambalpur district located in the western part of Odisha is one of the largest and oldest cities in the state. The town derived its name from the presiding goddess Samalai. Deogarh district is situated at the east, Jharsuguda and Bargarh at the west, Sundargarh at north, Sonapur and Anugul at the south of Sambalpur district. Sambalpur is surrounded by dense forests. Mahanadi which is the largest river of Odisha is passing through Sambalpur. The district head office is situated at Sambalpur. Sambalpur is also famous for Sambalpuri saree and Sambalpuri dance. Nuatihura is a Village in Maneswar Tehsil in Sambalpur District of Odisha State, India. It is located 20 KM towards East from District headquarters Sambalpur, 24 KM from Maneswar, 261KM from State capital Bhubaneswar. Kharsanmal(3KM), Baham(6KM), Kukudapali(7KM), Parmanpur(7KM), Kulundi(9KM) are the nearby Villages to Nuatihura. Rengali Tehsil towards North, jujomura Tehsil towards South is situated adjacent to Nuatihura Panchayat. The present study has been conducted in different villages of villages of Nuatihura panchayat, Maneswar block, Sambalpur district. The villages are multi-caste villages where the sub-caste groups like Kulta, Chamar, Turi, Harijan, Pap and Oram live. The majority of the people in the villages are dependent on agriculture, bidi making and daily wage labour for their living.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

Keeping in mind the importance and gravity of women’s involvement and contribution in political affairs of the country, the study makes a humble attempt to assess the political participation of women at the local level in the study area. It has following specific objectives.

1. To assess the involvement and participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institution in the study area
2. To know about the level of awareness and political ambition of women in the study area
3. To analyse the problems and challenges encountered by the women of the study area in the process of political participation

METHODOLOGY:

Relevant data and information for the present study have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The secondary data are collected from relevant books, magazines, periodicals, journals and official documents of the Panchayati Raj Institution with proper procedures. Primary data have been collected through the methods of interview schedule, focus group discussion, personal interview and informal discussion from the sample respondents of the study area. Purposive sampling technique has been used for the present study to get the sample. Data have been collected from Seventy Two women who are above the age of 18 years from different villages of Nuatihura Gram Panchayat of western Odisha.

FINDINGS:

Panchayati Raj Reforms:

The provisions regarding establishment, powers, and responsibilities of the panchayats is made in the Constitution of India through of 73rd Amendment in 1993. The Amendment introduced three-tier system, viz, panchayats at the village, intermediate and district levels in every state, except provision of skipping

intermediate level in states with less than twenty lakh populations. The Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women are enshrined with the provision of reservation of seats. The tenure of the Panchayat is fixed for a period of five years which is the current trend. The State Election Commission is given the power to prepare the electoral rolls and conduct panchayat elections. The state government is also empowered to make laws providing criteria for the disqualification of candidature from panchayat elections. The Panchayati Raj reforms have empowered the panchayats to function as institutions of self-government. It has also the responsibility to bring economic development and social justice under its jurisdiction. This helped the weaker sections of the society especially women to take part and to share the responsibility of governance and development at least at the sub-district levels.

The Process of Decision Making:

Having the capacity to think and take decisions independently about self is one of the determining factors of the process of empowerment. The socio-cultural background of the individuals and the values of the particular society also play a seminal role in enabling and providing appropriate opportunities to the women to take part in the important phenomena of the society. Creating greater awareness among both women and men is also essential at the same time to bring attitudinal change among the male members of the society towards the women. It is lamented that a law cannot be passed to bring change in the attitude of the people that is women-supportive and women-friendly. But deviation is observed in the study area with regards to the decision making of the women is concerned in the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The women are not provided proper opportunities and there found to be male dominance in the PRIs. It is seen during the study that the decision taken by the women are influenced by the male members of society. In most of the instances the husbands of the women political representatives play dominant roles in the decision-making process. There are also instances where the decisions are taken in the absence of the women representative. (Sara and Susanne's 2003) empirical study focuses on the obstacles to women to enter the political sphere and decision-making in Gram Panchayats in Kerala State. They point out that political participation as a democratic right for women does not mean that they have the same possibilities of entering the political field, as do men. Referring to the Kerala model of development, they say 'high human development provided high social status to women but this has not been transformed into political empowerment'. The male-dominated society creates obstacles for women as men set rules and norms in the public arena. The women of the study area hardly participate in the Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha where the majority of the decisions are taken regarding different developmental activities. It is seen that these meetings are mostly attended by the male members of the villages. The socio-cultural milieu of the study area along with the hesitation of women is the combined factor for less participation of women in those meetings. Gochhayat (2013) attempted to know the extent of the political participation of women and the problems faced by them. The study shows that the political participation of women in the functioning as well as in the electoral process of the Panchayats is not satisfactory. It is surprising to note that some respondents are unknown about the names of political parties and cast their votes identifying the symbols of political parties. The women of the study area are apathetic towards politics. Some of the responsible factors for such backwardness include parochial culture, patriarchal society and low level of education.

Similar situations are observed in the present study. The socio-cultural setting of the study area stands as a great barrier for the participation of women in different meetings organised at Panchayat level. An in-depth observation of the socio-cultural setting of the study area shows that the women are not interested to participate in the meeting at the middle of the village and among the male members. One of the respondents says:

I have many issues and points to discuss the development of my Panchayat but I do not attend the meeting because it is held in the middle of the village and no women participate. How can I sit among the male members of my family and neighbour in the middle of the village? Presence will be considered an odd one and people will judge my behaviour. The above statement made by the respondent indicates that some women are genuinely interested to participate in the Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha but the socio-cultural dimension of the locality prohibits the women to participate in those meetings. If any woman would dare to participate and put her opinion in front of the male members in the village meetings than it would be viewed as deviant behaviour and people would look down upon her. Thus the women's participation in the decision-making process is less and it is observed that the higher castes are more prone to this orthodox. Joseph (2001) discusses the use of modern technology in empowering grassroots women. She says that Women found themselves handicapped by their domestic responsibilities, low esteem, poor social status, inexperience with leadership and in many cases, non-cooperation or even outright hostility from family

members and fellow elected representatives'. The study shows that some male members of the study area are seen to be encouraging women to fight election but once the women get elected, the male members take advantage of keeping them out of important meetings. The male members mostly their husbands attend the meetings in place of elected women representatives. In the process the ideas and decisions of the male members get implemented and the women remain marginalised inspite of being elected in the elections. The opinions and views of the respondents are ignored on the ground that they belong to the different gender i.e. 'women'. Majority of the official works are handled by the husbands and the women representatives are pressurised to approve their decisions. Mahanta and Sinha (2007) in their study have found that political workers use their strategies by influencing women members. In case of the women belonging to scheduled caste and scheduled tribe, the candidatures for elections at Panchayat level are not filed out of their own interest. Several factors play important role behind the screen that includes the pressure of their husbands, sons or any other male members of the family and village. Many of the respondents of the study area share their experience during the fieldwork that they are pressurised by the male members of the family, relatives, neighbourhood, and villagers to be candidate for the elections. The male members belong to some political parties and the pressure of political parties is not an exception to it. The elected women representative faces the burden of dual responsibility of handling the household chores and simultaneously maintaining the duties of political nature. The mobility of the women get restricted due to the household responsibility. The present study indicates that women's role in the public domain does not lead to lessening and sharing of domestic burden. They have to bear both their domestic responsibilities and public duties. During the study it is seen that some of the women representatives are active, articulate and bold to share their views while few others are passive listener. It takes time for the women representatives to adapt into the new environment of politics and adjust themselves with the new kinds of experiences and day to day challenges. They depend quite often on the officials and administrative staff for shouldering up their responsibilities. The women representatives of the study area mentions that they do not get enough time to invest in village affairs. Srivastava (2011) in his paper on "Minority Representation of a Political Majority Group: Women in Indian Democratic Process", opines that the low representation given to women by various political parties on their lists of candidates for the elections to the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies is not merely an indicator of their inferior political status but reveals their subordinate position in society and refusal to recognize their right and ability to participate in the nation's activities. Political awareness, education, training and increasing level of confidence are very much required for women's participation. The societal and cultural constraints, economic dependence on male, lack of local financial resources, interference of political parties needs to be addressed for better participation of women in the political scenario of Odisha.

Level of Awareness about PRIs among the Women:

The political participation of women is directly proportional to the level of awareness among the women. The level of awareness regarding panchayati Raj Institutions must be tested to know about the level of participation in political affairs. It is essential that the women of any state must be aware about the political provisions and their political rights. The women can only be able to take part in the political process in the true sense when there will be increased awareness among them regarding the different political provisions. The women should have knowledge about the power and functioning of the PRIs, the sources of income of the panchayat, seats reserved for women in different levels and a good understanding of the political hierarchy. In this context the following table (Table No. 1) gives a glimpse about the level of awareness among the sample respondents of the study area.

TABLE 1: Level of Awareness among Respondents in the Study Area

Level of Awareness	Respondents saying 'yes,	Percentage
Knowledge about 73 rd Amendment	11	15.27%
Sources of Income of Panchayat	15	20.83%
Power & Works of Panchayat	25	34.72%
Seats reserved for women in PRI's, Assemblies & Parliament	21	29.16%
Total	72	100%

Level of awareness plays a significant role in the political participation of women in particular and of the people in general in any state. It is indirectly linked with the political empowerment of women at grassroots level. The above table clearly indicates that the level of awareness among the women of the study area is low. The table shows that out of the total 72 sample respondents only 11 (15.27%) of women knows about the 73rd amendment. Since the education level of the sample respondent is low, they are unable to give positive answer when the question was asked regarding the 73rd Amendment. Many of the respondents reported during the focus group discussion to have never heard about the Amendment before. However some young respondents who are comparatively more educated than the aged respondents respond to the question in a positive manner. It is pertinent to know about the sources of income of the Panchayat for smooth running the office. Bit it is disappointing that only 15 (20.83%) of the respondents know about the sources of income in Panchayat. A total of 25 (34.72%) know about the Panchayati Raj’s power and how Panchayati Raj works. Constitutional provisions have been made for the reservation of seats for women in the PRIs to ensure more political participation of women and the awareness about it plays a crucial role for inclusion of women in the political domain. However the only 21 (29.16%) women are aware about the provision of reservation of seats for them. From the above analysis it can clearly be stated that the awareness level of women of the study area is abysmally low.

Electoral Participation of Women:

Some key dimensions can be taken into consideration to measure the political participation which includes (1) women’s participation as voter (2) women’s participation as candidate (3) women participation as campaigner (4) women participation in the actual decision making process. The knowledge regarding these dimensions can be helpful for the policy makers to identify the weak areas and take appropriate steps to ensure more inclusion of women in the political affairs of the country. Various types of remedial actions can be taken by the stakeholders in this regard. It is a positive sign that at the local level, women's participation as an elected representative has been gradually increasing primarily because of the reservation introduced for women as per the 73rd amendment in the Indian constitution. However the matter of concern is to what extent the women elected representatives enjoys their rights and perform their duties properly.

Table 2: Electoral Participation of Women during last Panchayat Election

Type of Participation	No. of respondents Saying ‘yes’	Percentage (%)
As a Voter	45	62.5 %
Active Supporter of any political Party	12	16.66%
As a campaigner	11	15.27%
As a Candidate	4	5.55%
Total	72	100%

Women participation during the election time is very much essential in the context of political participation of women. The women’s participation in election as voter, supporting political parties, participation in election campaign and most importantly participation as a political representative have been assessed. To make the research analytical questions related to the above table (Table No.2) have been asked during the fieldwork. The result shows that a majority of 45 (62.5%) women participated in the last election as a voter. It means that only 62.5% of the sample respondents have casted their vote during the last Panchayat election. Out of 72 respondents 12 (16.66%) women responded to have strongly supported any political party. It is mentioned here that while this question was asked, the respondents were not open enough to answer and they were hesitant to freely express about their political support. Taking part in the campaigning of the election is a strong symbol of women’s involvement in the electoral process. It is a common phenomenon in Odisha that majority of the campaigners is seen to be males. The same trend is found in the study area which shows that only 11 (15.27%) respondents have participated as campaigner in the last election. A very low 4 (5.55%) respondents have filed their candidature for Panchayat election.

Political Ambition of Women:

To be ambitious in life is a positive sign of progressive mind for all individuals including women. When women are ambitious, they strive to achieve their set goals in any sphere of life. There are many examples of women breaking the social barriers and being successful in their respective fields. The women of India have made historic examples of being success civil servants, businessman, doctors, engineers etc. The women have excelled well in the political walks of life too but this number is comparatively less than men. It undoubted that few women are gradually taking part in every sphere of life breaking the stereotype mind set of the patriarchal society. The dreams of the majority of the women remain suppressed and repressed under the dominance of the male member of the society. The political ambition of women at the grassroots level has manifold implications open the social, economic, educational, legal and political dimensions of society. These dimensions are intertwined with one another and have repercussions open one another in the participation and empowerment of women at the local level.

Table 3: Political Ambitions of the Sample Respondents

Responses	Ambition to be elected as Political Representative			
	ZP	AP	GP	Total
Yes	8	10	37	55 (76.38 %)
No	6	5	6	17 (23.61%)
Total	14 (19.44%)	15 (20.83%)	43 (59.72)	72 (100%)

The present study tries to explore the political ambition of women of the study area and it shows that the women are highly ambitious to take part in the grassroots politics. Table No. 3 reflects the interest of women and their political ambition. It shows that out of 72 respondents a majority of 55 (76.38%) women have the ambition to be elected as the political representatives of their area. They want to represent their people and solve the local problems. Out of these 55 women 8 are interested to be elected in the level of Zilla Parishad (district level), 10 are interested to be elected in the Anchalik Parishad (Block level) and the rest 37 are interested to be elected in the Gram Panchayat level. The figure shows that many of the women feel confident to put their candidature at the Gram Panchayat level. Only 17 (23.61%) women are disinterested to be elected as the political representatives of their area. It is crystal clear from the above table that the women of the study area are highly ambitious to be involved in the political affairs of their locality but due to lack of support and encouragement, their ambitions remain unfulfilled. It should be noted here that even if the women are elected, they should be given the opportunity to enjoy their political power. It is generally seen in almost all states of India that the real power is enjoyed by the male members of the family of the women representative. Reddy (2004) in his article entitled, "Functioning of Panchayats in Andhra Pradesh" discussed the issues of convergence and emerging concerns in Panchayat Raj system of Andhra Pradesh. He mentions that Women who got elected in the Panchayats under reservations have become nominal candidates without exercising real functional power. Dalits do not have freedom to cast their vote, leave along to contest in the elections, obstruction including threats have created a situation hostile to the under privileged sections.

Challenges Faced by Women Representatives:

The indifferent attitude of the people, ignorance, and lack of awareness are some of the key reasons of poor involvement of Panchayat members in implementation of development programmes. The women representatives of the study area also mentions about their inability take independent political decisions. They reported that they consult their spouses and other family members for taking decisions in Panchayat meetings. It means that even though the women are elected as the political representatives, they do not enjoy the political power in the true sense. During personal interview a respondent says: "I am elected as a political representative during the last election and involved in the political activities but I always consult my husband before taking any decision. My husband also suggests me not to take decisions

by myself. My husband says that I might be put into trouble by the people of opposite political party and I should be very careful in taking decision.”

The decisions are influenced by the male members of the locality. People have a general tendency to believe that women are more emotional as compared to men and hence they are not suitable for taking political decisions. This anti-feminist thought of the locality affects the decision-making ability of the women since they are not given proper opportunity and liberty to take decisions independently. Sivanna and Gayathridevi (2012) in their paper examine the situation of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) at various levels - political, social, economic and personal. More particularly, it aims to understand how the EWRs use their agency to address and negotiate issues like feminization of invisibility, proxy governance and politics of exclusion. Sarmah (2010) in his paper “Political Empowerment of Women: A case study of Bodo Women of Assam,” depicts the position of women in Assamese society. The author concludes that Bodo women have acquired a new role and without distributing their traditional family life, they have come out of their private domain to actively participate in the public domain. However, very contrasting findings are found in the study area where the women are found to be in problems in taking care of the household chores and panchayat activities. Women of the study area found to be struggling in maintaining the balance between the political and personal life. Though they are elected and should play important roles in the public domain, they are not free from shouldering up family responsibilities.

The work life of any office plays a significant role in deciding to what extent the women feel safe and secure working with their male co-workers. There must be a women-friendly work environment so as to encourage the women to lead a healthy work life. It is very pertinent to note that the male workers of the study area are very cooperative and supportive towards the female workers as mentioned by the respondents. However sometime they are restricted to stay in the office beyond the office hours by the family members. Some respondents explained that the villagers have the tendency to come directly to their home in spite of meeting them in the office which create uncomfortable situation in the family.

The elected women of the study area are found to be active in the implementation of different schemes and programmes run by both central and state government. The women are also gradually receiving greater support from their family to work in the public domain. Some respondents reported to be observing changes in the attitude of their family members towards them after elected as representatives. The family members are helping and assisting them in taking care of their children and performing household chores. The respondents strongly think that reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has helped them for their empowerment and upliftment. Mehta (2002) in his book entitled, “Participation of Women in the Panchayati Raj System” made an empirical analysis on the participation of women in PRIs in eastern and western regions of Uttar Pradesh. The two major findings of his study are: 1. Illiterates, married, but young women belonging to backward castes and Muslims dominated the village Panchayats in the study area. 2. Nearly 1 per cent of women representatives have no freedom to go alone to participate in outdoor activities. Similar situation have been observed in the study area. The women do not go alone to participate in the panchayat meetings. They take assistance from the male family members as they feel unsafe and insecure.

CONCLUSION:

It is worth mentioning that the provision of reservation has truly helped women in increasing political participation throughout the state and country. It has been able to bring many positive changes in the status of rural women. It imbibed among women the qualities like the enjoyment of power, self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of identity. However, there is still a long way to go to make women empowered and politically participative. The mere enactment of legislation and affirmative actions are not the solution. The need of the hour is to get people involved from every corner including civil society organizations, non-governmental organisations, community based organisations, policy-makers, lawyers and most importantly family members to create a barrier free enabling environment for women.

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