



Women's participation in the gram sansad meetings: A comparative case study of ten gram sansad of mal and matiali blocks

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Abstract

India is the largest democratic country in the world with 69 crores male and 65 crores female population. To govern over these population in a time by central government and state governments is not possible. So, thinking about grassroot governance came in the mind of great men of India. After 1992, Panchyat Raj Institution got constitutional status through many struggles as the form of 73rd constitutional amendment act 1993 and west Bengal government modified it in the form of west Bengal panchayat amendment act 1994. According to which people were given chance not only to participate in the political process of gram panchayat but also to discuss the problems of the people and the village, to identify the beneficiaries, to make the plan for developing the village. For that three level of gram panchayat created such as (a) gram sabha (b) gram sansad and (c) beneficiary committee. This paper tries to locate the level of women's participation in the gram sansad meetings of mal and matiali block and also locate the problems in the nature and the impact of women's participation in the gram sansad meetings, the micro site of women's participation in the politics.

Keywords: Women's participation, gram sansad meetings, mal and matiali blocks

Introduction

Before analysing the women's participation in gram sansads meeting, we must know about gram sabha, gram sansad and beneficiary committee.

Meaning of Gram Sabha

In west Bengal panchayat amendment act 1994, a gram sabha has been defined as a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls pertaining to a gram where a gram is mouza or part of a mouza or a group of contiguous mouzas or parts thereof as and how the state government may notify. A gram panchyat will have jurisdiction over the territorial limits of such a gram as notified by state government. Gram sabha meetings shall be held once every year during the month of December. One-twentieth of total members of gram sabha shall form quorum. The resolutions of gram sansads and views of gram panchyats shall be placed before gram sabha for deliveration and recommendation. The questions and recommendations coming before gram sabha shall be recorded and referred to gram panchayat for its consideration. The annual budget before being finally formulated by gram panchayat, must be approved by gram sabha. Other important issues like annual plan of gram panchyat and annual report of the activities of gram panchyat shall also be discussed in gram sabha (Bhattacharya, 2009).

Meaning of Gram Sansad

A gram sansad has been defined by the west Bengal panchayat amendment act 1994 as a body consisting of persons registered at any time in the electoral rolls pertaining to a constituency of gram panchayat delimited for the purpose of last preceding general election to the gram panchayat. For the convenience of election the state government, by rule divides the area of a 'Gram' into constituencies on the basis of number of members of gram

panchayat and allocates to roll used in the state legislative assembly elections is used in determining persons who constitute the voters of a constituency (In 1993 Panchayat Raj Institution election allotment was one seat per 500 voters, in 1998 it rose to one seat per 700 voters in order to cope up with the increasing population). Every gram sansad shall have one annual and one-half yearly meeting (in the month of may and November respectively) within the gram on such date and hour as may be fixed by the gram panchayat. One-tenth of total members shall form quorum for gram sansads meetings (Bhattacharya, 2009).

A gram sansad shall guide and advise the gram panchayat in regard to the schemes for economic development and social justice undertaken or proposed to be undertaken in its area. It shall (a) identify schemes which are required to be taken on priority basis for economic development of the village, (b) identify beneficiaries of the programmees, (c) mobilize mass participation for implementing the programmees, (d) constitute beneficiaries committees comprising not more than nine person who are not members of gram panchayats for ensuring active participation of people in implementing schemes in the area, (e) record its objection to any action of the pradhan or any gram panchayat members for failure to implement any scheme properly without participation of people of the area, (f) promote solidarity and harmony among all sections of people. Apart from these the gram panchayat shall place for deliberation and suggestion in the annual meetings of gram sansad the budget of the gram panchayat and report on the work done during the previous year and work proposed to be done in the following year by the gram panchayat. It shall also place the latest report on audit and accounts of gram panchayat before the gram sansads during their half-yearly meetings. Apart from these, the members of gram sansad in the meetings can discussed any other business related to the gram panchayat as be agreed upon by person present in such meetings. Thus

formally the gram sabha and the gram sansad have been given enormous power. Membership is open to every person irrespective of caste, religion, sex, and occupation. The policies of gram panchayats are expected to reflect the wishes of the people express through gram sansad. Not only shall such bodies guide in policies making, they shall also act as watch dog over panchayat activities, criticize panchayat for failure and help the panchayat in implementation, if reason for failure lie elsewhere. Although formally vested with such a lot of power, the real situation is different. Neither authorities nor the people give due significance to these for. As a result, although officially they exist, functionally they lack teeth. Even if the gram sabha due to their large size remain ineffective, the gram sansad cannot afford to remain so.

Meaning of Beneficiary Committee

According to west Bengal panchayat amendment act 1994, there shall be a committee at every gram sansad level comprising of not more than nine members among the every gram sansad members who will not be the members of gram panchayat and who will identify the needy beneficiaries by direct investigation and will report the gram sansad at the time of meeting.

Women’s Participation, Gram Sansad and Development

All of we know that development brings changes in the society in different forms and these changes occur with the participation of the common masses in different sectors. In my paper women’s participation in the gram sansad meetings of mal and matiali block, there is a platform for development as the form of gram sansad. But without participation in the gram sansad a area cannot be developed which is developing of underdevelop. Women’s participation is most importance. Participation brings awareness. Awareness brings a mood of change and a mood of change brings development. As M.K.Gandhi rightly said, “if you educate a man you educate an individual but if you educate a woman you educate entire family.” Women’s participation is one of the main ingredients of democracy. This is only through it that the responsiveness of elected representatives is proved and women also come nearer to

government. Mutual trust is developed between the ruler and the ruled which alone ensures the success of democracy. Discontentment among the masses is taken care of because women can express their views and disclose their feelings and aspirations freely before their elected representatives. Elected people can know the social and economic problems of the masses and try to their best to meet the grievances of the women. As against it if the gape between women and the elected representative goes on widening. The situation may become explosive in democracy. Giving practical shape to the gram sansads is a momentous task. The success of this endeavor depends upon the extence of women participation. There is a need to measure how closely that rural women identified themselves with these institutions and how far they shoulder the responsibilities with which their now vested. The concept of representative democracy offers opportunity to the women to elect their representatives to whom they would want to vest the authority to govern. Obviously this is not adequate. That is why the concept of participatory democracy gained prominence over the years. Its objective is to involve women directly in the process of decision making. The capacity of women to contribute to development is immense and is also largely advantageous. HENCH it seeks their participation in the development and administrative programme of which they are the beneficiaries. Thus broadening political participation is considered a virtue. The idea behind gram sansad was to bring about such a participatory democracy through democratic decentralization.

In view of the professed objective of participatory development through panchayat raj institution the west Bengal panchayat amendment act 1994 modified the 73rd constitutional amendment act of India and created three level for women’s participation- gram sabha, gram sansad, and beneficiary committees. Here it is found that gram sansad is a platform through which the grassroot need, problems, real situation can be identify if women will participate in its meeting. So that I conducted a survey in ten gram sansad of mal and matiali block to locate the level of women’s participation in the gram sansad meetings.

Table 1: Level of Women’s Participation In Five Gram Sansads of Rungamatte T.G. Gram Panchayat Under Mal Block.

| Sl. No. | Gram Sansads Name | Year | May | | | November | |
|---------|-----------------------------|------|---------------|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| | | | Female Voters | Female Participants | % of Women’s Participation | Female Participants | % of Women’s Participation |
| 1. | Sylee T.G. | 2012 | 749 | 197 | 26.30 | 161 | 21.49 |
| | | 2013 | 752 | 180 | 23.93 | 196 | 20.06 |
| | | 2014 | 759 | 201 | 26.48 | 201 | 26.48 |
| 2. | Raja T.E. | 2012 | 709 | 164 | 23.13 | 172 | 24.25 |
| | | 2013 | 714 | 149 | 20.86 | 165 | 23.10 |
| | | 2014 | 719 | 220 | 30.59 | 215 | 29.90 |
| 3. | Meengl Ass T.G. | 2012 | 571 | 134 | 23.46 | 181 | 31.69 |
| | | 2013 | 577 | 154 | 26.68 | 175 | 30.32 |
| | | 2014 | 582 | 176 | 30.24 | 203 | 34.87 |
| 4. | Meengl Ass T.G. Munsil Line | 2012 | 444 | 53 | 11.93 | 110 | 24.77 |
| | | 2013 | 449 | 132 | 29.39 | 104 | 23.16 |
| | | 2014 | 453 | 136 | 30.02 | 132 | 29.13 |
| 5. | Fatkan JOT Division | 2012 | 319 | 85 | 26.64 | 86 | 26.95 |
| | | 2013 | 325 | 92 | 28.30 | 96 | 29.53 |
| | | 2014 | 330 | 101 | 30.60 | 105 | 31.81 |

Source: Rungamatte T.G. Gram Panchayat under Mal Block

The above data shows that more women participated at Meenglass T.G. gram sansad almost 34.87% in the month of November 2014 and less women participated at Meenglass

T.G. Munsil line gram sansad in the month of may 2012 almost 11.93%.

Table 2: Level of Women’s Participation In Five Gram Sansads of Matiali Batabari 1 No. Gram Panchayat Under Matiali Block:-

| Sl. No. | Gram Sansads Name | Year | May | | | November | |
|---------|-------------------------------|------|---------------|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| | | | Female Voters | Female Participants | % Of Women’s Participation | Female Participants | % Of Women’s Participation |
| 1. | Parimal Mitra Nagar | 2012 | 277 | 49 | 17.68 | 32 | 11.55 |
| | | 2013 | 280 | 58 | 20.71 | 62 | 22.14 |
| | | 2014 | 281 | 62 | 22.06 | 38 | 13.52 |
| 2. | Killcot T.T.G. | 2012 | 362 | 62 | 17.12 | 21 | 05.80 |
| | | 2013 | 369 | 96 | 26.01 | 72 | 18.18 |
| | | 2014 | 375 | 86 | 22.93 | 49 | 13.06 |
| 3. | Aibheel T.G. Hospital Line | 2012 | 562 | 62 | 11.03 | 41 | 07.29 |
| | | 2013 | 570 | 59 | 10.35 | 47 | 08.24 |
| | | 2014 | 575 | 63 | 10.95 | 55 | 09.56 |
| 4. | Mangal Bari Basti | 2012 | 429 | 34 | 07.92 | 37 | 08.62 |
| | | 2013 | 436 | 45 | 10.32 | 34 | 07.79 |
| | | 2014 | 442 | 48 | 10.85 | 37 | 08.37 |
| 5. | Dangee T.G. | 2012 | 576 | 35 | 06.67 | 48 | 08.33 |
| | | 2013 | 582 | 37 | 06.35 | 29 | 05.49 |
| | | 2014 | 589 | 37 | 06.28 | 41 | 06.99 |

Source: Matialibatabari 1 No. Gram Panchayat Under Matiali Block

The above data shows that more women participated at killcott T.G. in the month of may 2013 almost 26.01% and less women participated at Dangee T.G in the month of November 2013 almost 05.49%.

Comparatively both the data shows that more women participated at Meenglass T.G. gram sansad almost 34.87% in the month of may 2014 under mal block. Whereas less women participated at Dangee T.G. gram sansad almost 05.49% in the month of November 2013 under Matialli Block.

Regarding Socio-Economic Status and Knowledge about Access to Information of Mal and Matialli Block

A survey was conducted by me at five gram sansad of Rungamatte T.G. gram Panchyat under mal block and five gram sansads of Matialli Batabari 1no. Gram Panchyat under Matialli block from 100 respondents each regarding socio-economic status and knowledge about access to information.

Comparatively it was shown that the socio-economic status of mal block is better than Matialli block in the area of work force, literacy rate, level of B.P, women’s speaking power, education qualification and advance thinking. On the other hand in the field of access to information mal block is far better than matialli block. The more people of mal block read news paper regularly, listen radio, watchin T.V. for different types of knowledge. More people of mal block cast their vote, know their political leaders from top to the bottom, aware about their political situation, know about the gram sansad meeting and participate in it.

It means that the general information regarding socio-economic status and access to information are indicators of people participation and development.

Obstacles on The Way of Women’s Participation in The Gram Sansad Meetings:

There are many obstacles on the way of women’s participation in the gram sansad meeting. Firstly, gram sansads operate in a complex social environment. Caste, class, and gender hierarchies have a crucial bearing on institutional process and democratic practices. Secondly, participation in gram sansad is effected by the apathy of

women. This indifference has its roots in the long historical background of non participation in governance because of entrenched caste, class, and gender hierarchies, which are quite unparticipatory. Thirdly, the political culture promoted since independence has also been one patronage and it has certainly not encouraged the participation of women in institutional process. Fourthly, low level of education of women and socio-cultural norms forbids them to inter into politics. Fifthly, conservative attitude of the family members and the system of patriarchy prevailed in the society also responsible for their backwardness. Lastly, to some extent, poverty and lack of financial control of women make them dependent on their male counterpart. So they do not have independent decision making power in the family for which they show their apathy towards politics. Though a large number of women are backward in all respect, there is some positive sign that has come out from this survey. Some of the women as I have found in my survey are very conscious and actively participate in the affairs of gram sansad and they are also interested to contest in the election in order to exercise power. A great change has been taken place in the mindset of women as well as of their family members. This is the result of increasing development of mass media (like radio, newspaper, T.V. internet, etc). Communication system, role of political parties and perhaps 73rd constitutional amendment act brought a sea change in the outlook of man towards women so political participation of women in the affair of gram sansad of mal block is gradually developing.

Field Result: The Reason for Less Participation in the Gram Sansad Meeting of Matiali Block

The general socio-economic status of matiali block shows the poor condition of matiali block. Women engage in the tea garden work and so they have no time to take part in the meeting. They don’t know that there is a gram sansad in their village. They were not aware about their rights. Those who knew pointed out that they went to the sansad only of the knew that beneficiary list would be prepared. The meeting is kept after 3pm, when people come back from work but as the respondents pointed out that they fill too tired to attend the meeting and have to take care of their family. Usually the women who participate in the sansad meeting hardly take as they are either illiterate or cannot get their voice heard and influence the agenda which gradually

make them stop taking. So they don't want to come in the meeting.

The Reason for This More Participation In The Gram Sansad Meeting of Mal Block

In mal block more people, especially women participated more than matiali block although this percentage of participation is not enough. There are some reason for more women participation in the gram sansad meeting in mal block which are as following; the male voter of male block engage in different types of works so they send their wives to attain the meeting. A part from that they are not invited to the sansad. Here in mal block, it is seen that more people participated due to personal benefits but not for the common benefits on announcement of governmental schemes. When the agenda of meeting will be sanitation and education, annual action plan, last audit report at that time almost 2% or 3% of total voters of sansad participated in the meeting. The B.P.L. category women are found to participate more than the A.P.L. categories women who hardly come to the sansad meeting.

Recommendation To Increase People Participation In The Gram Sansad Meeting Specially Women's Participation

1. Women workers like the ANMs, anganbadi workers and prachetas of women development departments must be made to attend the gram sansad meeting to attract women voters to attend the gram sansad meeting and increased women participation.
2. Schemes benefiting the powers peoples must be discuss in detail and beneficiaries identified impartially in public so as to developed confident of the women in the gram sansad meeting.
3. Proper publicity should be ensured through the BDO and his staff. The extension officer should ensured it on the preceding day on the sport.
4. Instead of holding the gram sansad meeting on one single day, their should be a full one munth programme where grievances of all the department can be shot out. Gram sansad meeting can, however be held on one day in one block of the same district because the block level officials are separated and they can attain the gram sansad meeting.
5. The gram sansad should also have the power to sanction some felt needs of the villagers on the spot to develop the faith of the women in the power of the gram sansad. For this purpose, untied funds should also be placed at their disposal the agenda of gram sansad meeting should be circulated in advance in news paper and it will be the duty of the sarpanch and the panchayat officials to discuss the full agenda and to record complete proceedings.
6. The sarpanch should be treated as automatically disqualified if he/she fails to call the gram sansad meeting as per the programme should by the BDO.
7. The gram sansad meeting should be held forth times in a year.
8. Empowerment is possible only when gram sansad voters are made aware of their powers and capacity building programme is undertaken on a large scale by NGOs with government support so that pressure group actively works in the gram sansad and they work effectively.
9. To activate the gram sansad meeting, the decisions of gram sansad should be binding on the panchayat, rather than their advisory role as at present.
10. Awakens women to their selfhood and human rights.
11. Educates them about their powers and responsibilities as panchayat leaders.
12. Builds their capacity to create a vision and plan actions to achieve it.
13. Links them with government and other resource people in their area. This is reinforced through needs-based programmes that women request to strengthen their skills in communication, finances, and knowledge of laws and government programs.
14. It is evident that men's attitude towards women's entry into politics has begun to change from that of total rejection to limited encouragement and in some cases even t active encouragement. This trend needs to be strengthened through orientation courses and training programmes for officials and elected representatives, both men and women. Besides there is a need to train the women leaders at regular intervals to enable them to manage the responsibilities assigned to them in the panchayats at all the levels. Since the hard up women members found it difficult to forgo their wages for attending training programmes, these must be organized at their doorstep and some of the articulate panchayat leader should be involved as the trainers.
15. Another important effort required for real empowerment of rural women is to bring about an attitudinal change in both men and women. The feeling that women are meant for household activities and rearing children needs to be transformed into a feeling of equal partnership of women and men. To inculcate this they should be imparted education for bringing about social and political awareness among both.
16. Studies on women in politics have emphasized that contact with outside world makes women more alert and also active in the political process. There could be two ways of doing it. Firstly, interaction between enlightened rural women and illiterate elected one's should be encouraged. Secondly, these women could be taken out to the urban areas and their interacting with educated urban elected women representatives in arranged.
17. The women should also be encouraged to organize them. The mahila mandals in the village can be effectively use as instruments to mobilize them for this purpose. Some successful women's organizations can also act as catalytic agents for encouraging the women's participation in social and political activities. The government should provide finances and infrastructure to some of the deserving and successful women organizations to take up the responsibility of encouraging the women elected representatives. The leaders of women's movement in the country could also take up this task. They too can provide support to sensitize the rural women.
18. Incentives play a vital role in ensuring the participation of elected representatives in decision-making. It has been noticed that there are certain very active and enlightened women leaders at all the levels of panchayats, who have been successfully implementing the developmental schemes and have ensured overall development of their constituencies. Such leaders need

to be encouraged by publicizing their leadership qualities and honoring them in public meetings. It will certainly encourage other women representatives and their success stories and good practices will get replicated.

19. The media both print as well as electronic can play an important role in creating awareness in the rural society. It can act as an agent of political socialization for inculcating the values of gender equality and gender justice.

Conclusion

The best way to bring about people's participation is to activate the gram sansads. After study I have found that despite the existence of these bodies, people's participation is very normal. People hardly convince interest in attending these meetings. Whoever attends acts as a passive Observer. Opposition supporters use these for to vent their anger and dissatisfaction rather than suggesting constructive alternatives. The political parties, on their part, do not take any step to encourage people to participation.

One way to encourage people is to provide the gram sansads some sort of a power to recall any member of a gram panchayat or remove the gram panchayat as a whole, if they find the person at fault. Only this can make the elected representatives accountable to the people. It may make these for a more powerful rather than making them the for a for mere discussion, under the present rules people have nothing to do after election the representatives for five years. On the other hand the elected representatives feel safe once elected, for they know that people cannot remove them. They can be removed only by executive action. Hence they find it necessary to please the bureaucracy and partly higher ups even if people's interests are at stake.

Only an active gram sansad can break the people's dependence on the panchayats. The people think that panchayat will work for their upliftment. They are unaware of their own responsibility. People must learn to perceive panchayat as their own institutions and also feel that by participating in panchayat activity they are not wasting time for others. Even if people do not participate in zilla and block panchayat. What is surprising is that also keep away from the gram panchayat. The proximity of people towards gram panchayat is maximum. This relative proximity provides people the chance to participate more in gram panchayats. If they do not, it means they miss even the last opportunity to usher in participative democracy.

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