

Dalit Women's Representation and Participation in Local Governance: Ratlam District of Madhya Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on the study of rural women's political participation in local governance with specific reference to district Ratlam of Madhya Pradesh. Taking the status quo pertaining to the representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, it identifies the barriers towards the development and advancement of women towards senior administrative and political positions; and it also argues for increased representation and participation of women in panchayat. The presence of more women is required if the local governance system is to become inclusive of the diversity of the people it represents, especially women. Furthermore, change is more likely to occur when elected women are supported by the presence of more women at the most senior administrative levels in the panchayati raj system. Through their knowledge and understanding of the construction of power relations at the grass root level, rural women have innovatively managed to produce, reproduce and use alternative strategies which are based on their sexuality and traditional gender roles in challenging and transforming gender inequality at the local level and in improving the quality of rural women. The purposes of the study were to identify and explore the key challenges that rural women face in their representation and participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and reflect on the initiatives that are being undertaken by the government in facilitating the full representation and participation of rural women in local governance.

A quantitative research method was used in the study. Empirical data was gathered through structured interviews in the Karadiya, Pipliya Maru and Kanthariya women headed gram panchayat of Alot block of District Ratlam. The research findings indicated that rural women face a number of constraints in getting access to and participating in local governance.

1. Introduction

The roots of the present always lie in the past. So, the justification of the law relating to the political participation of the women can be appropriately scrutinised only by looking into the past history of any system. The way to shed some light on the women's right of political participation is to look at its past at national as well as global level. However, in India also women have a long history of suffering and exploitation. The women remained victims of violent actions and also they had to suffer various types of discrimination, exploitation and torture-both physical and mental not only in the men's society, but also within the four walls of the family thereby disturbing the equilibrium in the society. The ability to challenge the subordination was seriously affected by the omission of women from positions of power in all its manifestations. In order to participate as women and to change the very nature of that power by which they were excluded, they had to be in politics. In India, in the politics, the root for the participation of women can be traced back to 19th century reform movement. The condition of the woman was also in the sorry state of affairs at the dawn of the Colonial Era. The British believed in the policy of least interference in the religious sentiments of the natives. Various social reformers thought that the social reform can be initiated by educating women and bringing progressive legislation

By raising consciousness and by making people sensitive to injustice done to women, social evils can be eradicated. Their efforts resulted in Governmental resolution of 1829, banning the practice of sati and also in Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 as well as campaign against child marriage. No doubt these social reform movements were aimed at educating women, raising the age of marriage and remarriage of child widow etc., however, these were not serious efforts concerned particularly with the question of gender parity. The Swadeshi Movement in 1905 observed the entry of women into the independence movement. Annie Besant who accelerated the process of women's association in 1914 with her entry into Indian politics, was the first woman to be elected as president of the Indian National Congress. Sarojini Naidu too became active in Indian National Movement. Mahatma Gandhi made serious efforts to arouse political consciousness in the poor, illiterate women in order to make them take part in the freedom movement from 1917 onwards. Large number of women plunged into national movement in response to Gandhi's call. His message "*when we call abala became sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful*", reveals the importance he gave for the strength of women.¹ According to Gandhi, the freedom struggle was an economic and social reform but not merely political. He urged men and women are equal but not identical. Women are equivalent to the male intellectually,

mentally and spiritually and they can participate in every activity.²

Thus, women were brought to the centre stage by the national movement. Against the colonial rule, from liberal homes and conservative families, urban centers and rural district, women single and married, young and old came forward and joined hands. In the 1937 election, 42 women were elected from the reserved constituencies and eight from the general constituencies and when the provisional cabinet was formed, they became ministers. There were 14 women members in the Constituent Assembly which met in December 1946.³ However, despite of this fact, the transfer of power from British to Indian hand provided Indian women an opportunity for participating in the democratic process. Thus, it can be said that the campaign for equal political participation in favour of women was itself divided into two phases. The first phase was regarding achieving female enfranchisement and being eligible for entering into the legislature during the period of 1917 to 1928. From 1928 to 1937, there was second phase in which the issues were the liberalisation of the terms of equality rights of voting for women and also the enlargement of their representation in the legislature. In India, the context of colonial situation created two sets of political authorities before whom the women had to make an appeal—the British Government and the nationalist leaders in order to achieve their electoral demands. The right to vote was granted by the Government of India Act, 1935 for all women above 21 years of age by whom the conditions of property and education were fulfilled. In the year 1950, the Constitution of India granted adult franchise to all its citizens.⁴

1.1 Women and Panchayati Raj in India

At present article 330 of the constitution provides for the reservation of seats for schedule caste and schedule tribes in the house. Of the people; article 332 makes a similar in the state assemblies, while article 243 D does so at the panchayati raj level. This was fixed at 22.5 per cent of the total seats. Following the 73th amendment, providing for reservation for women at the panchayat level, clause 2 was added in this article, reserving one third seats for SC and ST women within SC and ST quota, and clause 3 reserved one third seats for women, including the number of seats reserved for Women, under SC and ST quota. In the other words, we can say, in a local body of 100 seats, 23 were reserved for SCs and STs, of which 7 or 8 would be adjusted to include the 7 SC/ST women. The 33% seat reserved for women would also be adjusted to include the 7 SC/ST women seats, so that the general category of women reserved seats would come down from 33 to 26. The most striking feature in regarding to 73rd and 74th amendment is one third reservation of elected offices for women and for SCs and STs in proportion to their population. Representations of women and Dalit will certainly bring qualitative change in the functioning of panchayat. In initial stages, some cases of functioning by proxy may be reported, but once women taste, power they would assert their independence as it evident in case of west Bengal, Kerala, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and to certain extent Himachal Pradesh. The provision of women reservation for women will be only “naam ke waste”(just for name sake) and the women will be panchayats as proxies to their male counterparts.

As a result of reservation, a large number of women belonging to SCs and STs has got an opportunity to participate in the decision making process. The recent Constitutional amendments (73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments) however have brought about significant changes in the situation. With the advent of these Acts, today India has more than 500 district panchayats, around 5,100 block/taluka panchayats and about 2,25,000 village panchayats, 90 municipal corporations, 1,500 municipal councils, and 1,800 nagar panchayats. All these bodies would jointly elect three million representatives and a considerable number of them would be women. The trend owes impetus primarily to the provisions made in the Act that one-third of the seats (33.33 per cent) in the local bodies such as panchayats, nagara sabhas, municipalities and corporations shall be reserved for women. This one-third reservation means the possibility of one million women in the panchayats and municipalities of India. It is estimated that there are already 7,16,234 women in panchayats in all the States excluding Manipur, Bihar, and Jammu and Kashmir and several States went ahead and elected even more than one-third women members required under the Acts.⁵

The UPA government's Cabinet had, in its second term, cleared the Constitution 110th Amendment and the Standing Committee on Rural Development had also gone through the Bill as per norms. The Bill had first been introduced in the Lok Sabha in November 2009, after which it went through the committee process. It was re-introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2010 after the report had been tabled, after which it lapsed at the end of the 15th Lok Sabha in 2014.⁶ Currently, the bill is still pending in the Lower House of Parliament, which is Lok Sabha. The bill will only be passed if the ruling government supports the bill with full force, as they have the majority in Lok Sabha. Though there has not been any major development regarding the passing of Women's Reservation Bill in the recent months, if the current government takes steps for its upliftment, there is hope that the bill will be passed in Lok Sabha soon.⁷ The Constitutional Amendment was to ensure that 50% of total seats filled by direct elections in every panchayat be reserved for women. Among the States that already follow 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are Bihar, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh.⁸ There are still major gaps or structural constraints that women's organisations have to negotiate and overcome. Although the presence of women in Panchayat in large numbers through reservations, empowerment remains indefinable. There is need to have an improved empirical base in the context of low economic development, especially from Ratlam district, where no worthwhile study on women empowerment and participation in gram Panchayat has so far taken place. Taking a comprehensive view, the term “participation” in the present study was conceptualised in three ways, namely, symbolic or physical presence in Panchayat meetings, substantive role of women play in PRIs, and personal or internal development of women experienced as a result of their participation in PRIs. The study is aimed to understand the following objectives, they are as follows;

1. To find out the level of political awareness and participation among the rural women.

- To identify the roles and responsibilities of rural women in the functioning of gram panchayat and gram sabha.
- To suggest the viable measures for better political participation and empowerment of the rural women through panchayat raj institutions.

- What are the supports do women require so that they can do their work efficiently in gram panchayat?

1.2 Research Questions

In line with objectives to study socio-economic profile, participation, awareness, role and hurdles of women representatives and nature and extent of women empowerment in gram panchayat, the guiding questions for research were identified as under:

- What is the nature and extent of participation of women representatives in gram sabha meetings and the development agenda of gram panchayat?
- What are obstacles do women face in their functioning effectively as political representatives and decision makers?
- Have the elected women been able to make an impact on the Panchayati Raj Institutions and their overall empowerment in the different social and political contexts?

2. Methodology of the Study

2.1 Universe of Study

The main focus of this study is on the women headed gram panchayat within the panchayati raj system in Madhya Pradesh. For the study, the purposive selection of Ratlam district of Madhya Pradesh was to know about political participation and empowerment of rural women through panchayati raj institutions. The district was chosen keeping in view that the district represents almost all the caste categories with a sizeable population of Scheduled Caste, category.

2.2 Sampling Design and Unit of Observation

There are six blocks in Ratlam District and Out of six blocks only one block named Alot was purposely selected. The selection of block was based on the fair representation of the respondents SC (Alot) category. From the selected block, three woman headed gram panchayats were selected. The selection of woman headed gram panchayats were based systematic random sampling.

**Table No. 1
Sampling Design: Gram Panchayat (Women Headed)**

District Panchayat Ratlam				
Blocks	Highly Dominated Category (Population wise)	No. of Gram Panchayat	No. Of Women Headed Gram Panchayat	Selection of Women Headed Gram Panchayat
ALOT	Scheduled Caste	90 [#]	34	KARADIYA
				PIPLIYA MARU
				KANTHARIYA

[#]Source: District Statistical Office, Ratlam (MP)⁹

Elected women representatives, gram sabha members and govt. officials were the part of units of observation. From each selected women headed gram panchayats, five elected women representatives, five gram sabha members (woman), five gram sabha members (male) and five government officials (male) were interviewed for the study. Thus from selected block 15

elected women representatives, 30 gram sabha members (15 male and 15 female) and 15 govt. officials (male) were selected. As a result 15 elected women representatives, 30 gram sabha members (15 male and 15 female) and 15 govt. officials were the part of the sample from a block. Thus, total size of sample was 60.

**Table No. 2
Sampling Design: No. of Respondents**

Sr. No.	Gram Panchayat	Respondents			Total
		Elected Women Representatives	Gram Sabha Members (Male/Female) And Govt. Official (Male)		
			Women	Men	
ALOT (Block)					
1.	KARADIYA	05	05	10	20
2.	PIPLIYA MARU	05	05	10	20
3.	KANTHARIYA	05	05	10	20
Total		15	15	30	60

Source: Field Study

The structured interview helped in electing objective as well as subjective fact, relating to study. While interviewing, every attempt was made to put up the questions in a simpler manner, keeping in view the interest of respondents and language liked by them so as to get accurate information. So in the present study, the elected women representatives, gram sabha members (male and female) and government officials (male) were interviewed separately through the structured interview schedule. The interview schedule was based on rural women's political awareness, political participation, decision making, their empowerment and impediments. Secondary data was collected from government agencies, civil society organisations interacting with panchayati raj institutions and existing research studies.

3. Discussion of Findings

The present study would examine the scope of empowerment of rural women through panchayat raj institutions with special reference to district Ratlam of Madhya Pradesh in the context of increased participation and role performance of elected women representatives and members in gram panchayats. In summary, it can be said that the government of India is trying to empower the women through various political policies and programs but there still some gaps to be bridged.

The result of the study shows that the reservation for women can be an important impulsion to women's empowerment in gram panchayat but it is not a guarantee for the participation of the elected women representatives and members. The goal of women's empowerment cannot be accomplished only by giving reservation, the other social and demographic factors also influencing the elected women representatives and members to participate and work actively in decentralised governance. The study findings are based on a survey of 60 respondents (Elected Women Representatives, Women Gram Sabha Members and Male Gram Sabha Members & Govt. Officials) from the a purposely selected block of Ratlam District of Madhya Pradesh. This study presents the synthesis of key findings and highlights overall conclusion and suggestions.

Most of the respondents were from the age group of 26-35 years and None of them were from the age group of 56 and above years. However, proportion of women respondents from scheduled caste and scheduled tribes was also reported to be significant. The overwhelming majority of the respondents interviewed were married, least of them were divorced/separated. Most of them are illiterates and also less educated. The family main occupation was reported as agriculture. Most of the respondents were housewives while rest are in the profession of business, efficient work, handcraft and labour were the main profession of the spouses of respondents. The majority of respondents revealed that they do not have their own agriculture land while majority of the respondents reported that the size of their landholding is small, so they belongs to the marginal and small farmers categories. Economically, their families come from low and middle income groups. Majority of respondents further revealed that their monthly annual income is between Rs. 48001 to Rs. 72000.

The overwhelming majority of the elected women representatives has participated in the process of last election of gram panchayat and the majority of respondents reported that they having relation with those who are in politics. Their relatives of the respondents are respectively working as *Sarpanch/Up-Sarpanch/Panch and Zila Panchayat/Janpad Panchayat Members*. Political parties are connecting with the panchayat election and influencing the people of village by supporting them all the basic needs which they want at the time of the Gram Panchayat election, so that's why people of village are also associating with panchayats, but in the study almost half of the respondents react that they were not associated with the any political parties.

The majority of women respondents believe that the meetings of the gram panchayat and gram sabha are taking place regularly and the significant number of meetings of gram panchayats is also take place on the basis of the need of panchayat. The maximum number of elected women representatives is also attending the meetings and very smallest amount of respondents believes that due to domestic work, they had not attended meeting of gram panchayat/sabha. The majority of elected women representatives know that it is important for women to availing their presence in the meeting of gram sabha and they also know about the Panchayat Raj Act. The panchayat raj act aims to provide the three tier system at the local level governance. The maximum number of respondents has knowledge of it. As we all know that panchayat elections held regularly in every five years, majority of respondents has the knowledge of the tenure of panchayat election. Madhya Pradesh has already implemented 50% quota for women in the panchayati raj institutions, a significant number of respondents has the knowledge about the definite reserved seats for the women in the panchayat.

The majority of respondents do not know the required number of quorum of the meeting of gram sabha. However the significant number of elected women representatives have not knowledge of the necessary presence of women in the quorum of the meeting. So it is not a positive indication that many of the respondents do not know the factual information of the required quorum in the meeting of gram sabha. Majority of the elected women representatives are actively participating in the door to door publicity process of election and also participated in the voting process of the election. The overwhelming majority of the respondents accepted that they have been inspired by their husband/family/relatives to participate in the election process of gram panchayat. The maximum number of elected women representatives reported that the participation level of the women in contesting and voting process of election has been increased.

The half of the elected women representatives were always went along with others in the meeting of gram panchayat and the majority of them were also pointed that they always used to go with their neighbour in the meeting of gram panchayat and very least of them reported that they went with their husband in the meeting of panchayat. Women have to usually, put their thoughts/opinions in the meeting of gram panchayat. It is also important because they equally participate in the discussion will give multiple alternative ideas for the

development. The majority of respondents have been putting their thoughts/opinions at the meeting of gram panchayat and the significant number of women also doing preparation before attending the meetings of gram panchayat.

The significant number of elected women representatives are regularly participating in the discussions of the meetings of gram panchayat which related to, the formation of the rural development programme, violence against women and health and nutrition of whereas half of the respondents have also took sometime participation in the discussion related to construction of budget, public welfare programmes, making the list of beneficiaries and drinking water, sanitation and environment. The majority of respondents have replied that the decision on the various issues/matter/programmes has been taken collectively in the meeting of gram panchayat. The maximum number of elected women representatives believes women's reservation given in the panchayat is right advisable.

Half of the respondents pointed out that sometimes people are doing partiality in the working in gram panchayat/gram sabha. The majority of elected women representatives had answered that they have not faced any kind of trouble in contesting the election of gram panchayat.

Very least of respondents have replied that family not allowed them to contest election of gram panchayat and some of them also replied that having some domestic problem so that's why they had faced difficulty to contest the election of gram panchayat. Almost all respondents believes that sometimes their husband/male member of their family come along with them in the meeting of gram panchayat/gram sabha and their husband or male members are staying with them till the end of the meeting of the gram panchayat/gram sabha. Most of them have accepted that regularly their husband or other male person has given them suggestions/advice to them at the time of the discussion in the gram panchayat/gram sabha.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents have accepted that they have also participated in the training programmes of panchayati raj institutions and it is the best indication for the rural women that the majority of them have accepted that their level of knowledge regarding the functioning of panchayat, has been increased after attending the training programmes of panchayati raj institutions. A significant number of the respondents believe that after attending training programmes of panchayati raj institutions, they have been independently able to address the public meeting. The maximum number of respondents believed that after attending the training programmes of panchayat, they become more capable to address the public meetings. The collaboration is required for them to do any responsible and accountable work and women also need the involvement of few people for their consideration and cooperation towards the efforts which they are going to do. In support of this, the greater part of elected women representatives having faith that with the only collaboration of their husband they are able to do the work in panchayat.

When women need to do the various work of the panchayat they also need the permission from their family. So for this, the

maximum numbers of women are taking permission of the family for inspecting the construction sites, to meet the govt. official of the panchayat, to attend the training programmes, to attend the meeting of gram panchayat/gram sabha. We know that women's dependency on men become the problem before women to do any type of work independently. For this, a significant number of elected women representatives agreed that women can do independently her work, women can also do work equal to men, women are also playing an important role in the social activities and women are facing the problem of exploitations. The overwhelming majority of respondents have believed that *purdah pratha* for women are the big problem to women to face the meeting of gram panchayat. Women are also facing the many impediment factors in their daily life. So for this, maximum number of them were agreed with that women are inferior to men, women having the problem to go alone outside, they are dependent on men, they are facing the problem of racial discrimination, Speaking on the various topics and before the meeting are the major problem in the women and illiteracy has been cursed for them to perform their work and role in the gram panchayat. Negative and positive aspects of a plan or programme are natural things. But in this sensitive issue like women empowerment it is very important to find out the problems and also find out the solutions and suggestions to solve the problems. There are several problems in the way of women representatives in PRIs. It seems that it is injustice with the women until we are not able to solve such problems. Some of the main problems identified during the study are:

- (i) Political intervention in the functioning of panchayats.
- (ii) Women act as proxies for men.
- (iii) Husband's intervention of elected woman in her functioning.
- (iv) Lack of political awareness among the women in rural areas.
- (v) Negative public opinion regarding women's leadership capacity.
- (vi) Illiteracy or low standard of education among the women in rural areas.
- (vii) Dominance of elected male members of the panchayat; and
- (viii) Cultural values; violence against women; lack of assets and lack of mutual support among women are some hindering.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research findings indicated that rural women in Ratlam District face two problems in particular: underrepresentation and low participation compared to women in urban councils and men in formal political and economic institutions and formal and informal rural institutions. The factors commonly identified as barriers to women's participation include political violence, gender stereotypes and outright discrimination, personal obstacles such as lack of confidence, racially prescribed domestic roles, lack of education, lack of financial and socio-economic capital, and political institutions that are not conducive to balancing family and public life.

Male-dominated hierarchical power often purposefully excludes women's participation or devalues their contributions, creating a disabling environment for women's innovation.

These insubstantial informal institutional values, norms, structures, and processes are difficult to recognise and often constitute a greater barrier than formal rules. For women to benefit, leadership needs to become actively involved in the social transformation of patriarchal norms and values and must include women's perspectives on and participation in the transformation process. Women in leadership positions likewise need to challenge the rules and not to play by them.

5. Suggestions to Increase the Participation of Women's in PRIs

- There should be some Mobile Training as well as Advisory Team (or can be said Counseling Team) who can care after the members specially, of women members.
- There must be some follow-up session after each training, which can recover the training gaps of the women members.
- Participation of women representatives in the Self Help Group activities is a welcome trend. This should be encouraged particularly for poor women representatives.
- Panchayat staff should be well equipped to perform their roles Political neutrality of the Panchayat staff should be maintained while discharging their responsibilities. This aspect should be taken into consideration seriously during training of the Panchayat staff members.
- There should be one Help-line or Help-desk either in the district level or in State level so that the representatives can contact them at their need.
- There must be some assigned tasks for each member allotted by gram panchayat and accordingly members

should submit their report in a monthly meeting, in presence of administrative officers.

- The experience from the field of the research also suggests that apart from the remuneration being paid to the Pradhan and Up-Pradhan, there should be monthly remuneration system for members in general and women members in particular.
- Monthly honorarium for Pradhan and Up-Pradhan should be increased as their work-pressure has been increasing day by day. It is not possible for anyone to spend whole day in office instead of earning breads.
- Activities of women members other than the schemes should be encouraged by assessing the performance and awarding them in each year.
- For the development and empowerment of the rural women, we have to offer a chance to women to enter into the public and political sphere of the decision making, which is very important for them.
- Motivate women to participate in the political process and fight the election of the gram panchayat.
- Provide the advance panchayat training for their political empowerment.
- Giving education/training to the illiterate women in the village and also make them aware of the schemes and convince them to get their rights.
- Provide the sustainable support of the other women's group to the elected women, it can also increase the confidence of women to work in the Panchayat.
- Motivate women to attend more in the gram panchayat as well as the meeting of gram sabha which can explore her knowledge and give a freedom to talk frankly with others and making them self reliant.

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