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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND AWARENESS: A STUDY ON RURAL WOMEN IN ODISHA

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Abstract

The making of the constitution brought the women's legal equality and endowed them with the political rights to participate in every walk of life, but the practice is different from what is propounded. Political participation is a complex phenomenon, which can be comprehended by analysing some of the intrinsic factors. Moreover, these are not universal. The criteria for political participation vary from country, considering the nature of the society which they are living. The modern democracy has sufficient ground to justify the statement given by Bismark, "You may not take interest in politics but politics will certainly take interest in you." Therefore, women may in light note say that they are not interested in politics but every second in life will be regulated by politics. So the very idea to write this paper is to address how the rural women are cultivating a misconception in their mind that they are not political. This study attempts to highlight the political orientation of rural women. This paper enumerates the political awareness of women in local self-government which is a key indicator for political participation.

Keywords: Participation, Women, Political Awareness, Nature, Society, Interest.

Introduction

Origin of the Research

The idea flashed in my thought during the NSS survey when I was visiting along with my students to a nearby village. Our appearance made the women feel as if we were there to incorporate their names into any welfare scheme. The overall interaction with the women of the concerned village left an impression in my mind to study further about their level of political awareness and interests in the contemporary time.

Methods of the study

For the current study Relevant data and information are gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary data are collected from different books, publications, journals, magazines, and official records which are accessed through Panchayatiraj Raj Institution with proper procedure. The study using the purposive sampling selects 116 women above the age of 18 years from different profession. The samples are chosen from different villages of Narendrapur Gram Panchayat of Nayagarh district of Odisha. To collect the primary data, researcher has used the methods of questionnaire, interview and informal conversation with the respondents in the study area.

Objective of the Study

- To explore the level of political awareness, interest and involvement of rural women in Local Self Government.
- To know how far and to which extent, the right to vote has been helpful for the rural women in playing active role in politics?
- To assess the perception of women about the panchayatiraj system in general and their views on 'Elected women representatives' in particular.

Hypothesis of the Research

- Rural women are more interested in social life rather than political.
- Most of the women do not have independent thought.
- Politics does not make much sense for them.

Theories of participation

Lester Milbrath in his book 'political participation' has listed several types of behaviour serving as indicators and these are ordered so, as to represent decreasing degrees or levels of participation;

- Holding public or party office.
- Being a candidate for office.
- Attending a Caucus or a strategy meeting.
- Becoming an active member in a political party.



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- Contributing time in a political Campaign.
- Attending a political meeting or rally.
- Making a monetary contribution to a party or candidate.
- Contacting a public official or a political leader.
- Wearing a button or putting a sticker on the car.
- Attempting to talk another into voting in a certain way.
- Initiating a Political Discussion.ⁱ

Besides the above indicators, other political scientist has recognized different parameters for political participation such as; (a) Vote, (b) Support pressure groups by becoming a member, (c) be in communication personally with legislators, (d) participate in party activities, (e) be regularly engaged in spreading political views verbally among other citizens.ⁱⁱ

The indicators imply how political scientists and sociologists tend to define political participation. A good number of researches have been carried out on political participation mainly by American researchers. Hence, some of the items of behaviour have particular significance in the American cultural context, although similar or equivalent types of behaviour are customary elsewhere. As my work is limited to India, political participation in Indian context will not follow the same path definitely like America and other developed countries. Every independent country has its own history and struggle. Political participation comprises a broad range of activities through which people share and express their opinions in governance and try to take part in and shape the decisions that directly or indirectly affect their lives.

Democratic ethos in political participation

One of the basic principles of democracy is the devolution of power and welfare from the elite echelons to the ground level. The democracy that is functional around the world now a day, even as it has a long history of evolution but the institution of universal adult franchise and governance through regular and multi-party election has at most a 100 years or less of practice behind it. Indian women are fortunate enough to claim their franchise right after the independence than their counter parts in U.K and U.S.A signifies the progressive ideas of constitution makers. Definitely a few decades are not sufficed to develop a culture, but we have crossed nearly seven decades.

Women's suffrage movement in India

Indian women under British control, campaigned for their right to political enfranchisement in Colonial era. In addition to suffrage, they fought for women's right to run for and hold office throughout the British colonial period. Limited suffrage for women who owned property was granted by Britain in 1918, but British nationals living elsewhere in the Empire were exempt from the new law. Although petitions submitted by both men and women to the British commissions appointed to assess the voting laws in India, the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms disregarded the wishes of women. Suffragists delivered a number of petitions and reports in 1919 to the Indian Office and in front of the joint select committee of both Houses, demonstrating support for women's suffrage. In accordance with strict property, income, or educational requirements, Provincial Councils were given the authority to determine whether women could vote under the terms of the Government of India Act of 1919.

Women were given the right to vote and, in some cases, the opportunity to run for office in local elections between 1919 and 1929 in all British provinces and the majority of princely realms. The first victory came in the City of Madras in 1919, and it was followed by victories in the Kingdom of Travancore and the Jhalawar State in 1920, as well as the Madras Presidency and Bombay Presidency in the British Provinces in 1923. The Rajkot State established complete universal suffrage in 1923 and elected the country's first two female legislators that same year. The Muddiman Committee conducted additional study in 1924 and recommended that the British Parliament allow women to run for office. This led to a change in voting rights in 1926 and the appointment of the Simon Commission in 1927 to create a new India Act. Nationalists recommended boycotting that commission's meetings because it didn't have an Indian member. This led to divisions within women's groups, who sided with those who supported preserving limited suffrage based on economic and educational standards on one side and those who supported achieving universal suffrage on the other.ⁱⁱⁱ

To explore the expansion of the franchise, the Commission suggested for hosting round table conferences and the Joint Committee of the British Parliament received the report from the three Round Tables with little input from women, which recommended decreasing the voting age to 21, but keeping the limits on property and literacy, as well as basing women's eligibility on their marital status. Special quotas were also offered for women and racial and ethnic groupings in provincial legislatures. The



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Government of India Act of 1935 had these clauses. Even though it increased eligibility, the Act still only permitted 2.5% of Indian women to vote.

All subsequent suffrage-related initiatives were linked to the nationalist movement, which prioritised independence over women's rights. There were 15 seats reserved for women in the 1946 elections for the Indian Constituent Assembly. They contributed to the creation of the new constitution, and the Assembly approved the idea of universal suffrage in April 1947. Election rules were adopted in July, India gained its independence from British in August, and the preparation of voting rolls began in early 1948. Following that, the draft constitution's final provisions for voting rights and elections were added in June 1949, and the Constitution of India went into effect on January 26, 1950.

Political Thinkers on Women’s Suffrage:

In Politics, Aristotle delves into the role of women in the Polis, their place within the household, and the particular virtues they carry for society. He tries to justify the subordinate position of women in society through a natural justification for women’s natural confinement to domesticity, so women are unable to reach true eudemonia and participate in the politics for the common good. According to him ignoring women was to overlook one-half of the happiness of a society, making the society unstable and vulnerable, so he was emphatic that women should be made a part of the city and educational process but could be left out of the political process. He also goes to the extent, to describe women as an infertile male. Regarding his opinion about citizenship, he did not regard women as citizen and justified that they lacked the deliberative ability and the leisure to understand the working of politics.^{iv}

Plato accepted that men and women did not differ much, so they should be treated equally. Plato in his famous book Republic said that, “If women are expected to do the same work as men, we must teach them the same things.” However, he did argue for gender equality in education and also in society.^v

John Stuart Mill an English political thinker was an ardent supporter of women suffrage. In his book “Representative Government”, he elaborated that it is not ideal that difference of sex could not be the basis of political rights. Women make up half of the population, thus they also have a right to vote since political policies affect women too. He also theorises that majority men will vote for those MPs who will subordinate women, therefore women must be allowed to vote to protect their own interests. Mill was not just a political theorist; he actively campaigned for women's rights as an MP and was the president of the National Society for Women's Suffrage.^{vi}

Table: 1 Electoral Participation of Women in last Panchayatiraj Election

Type of Participation	No of Respondents saying ‘Yes’	Percentage
As a candidate	9	7.75%
As an active supporter of any political party	18	15.51%
As a campaigner	24	20.68%
As a Voter	65	56.03%
Abstain from exercise the voting rights	00	0
Total	116	100%

Source: (data collected from the field study.)

Above Table indicates the participation of women in PRIs. Where 65 numbers of women have participated only as voter and 24 women campaigned for their family member or for their supporter. Though there is no provision of participation for political parties in Panchayatiraj election except the election of Zilla parisad but the reality is highly involvement of parties in all level of election, so women supporters of concerned parties are also involved to influence the women voter in favour of their party candidate. They are 18 in numbers. All respondents exercise their voting rights no one abstains from exercising the franchise.



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Table:2

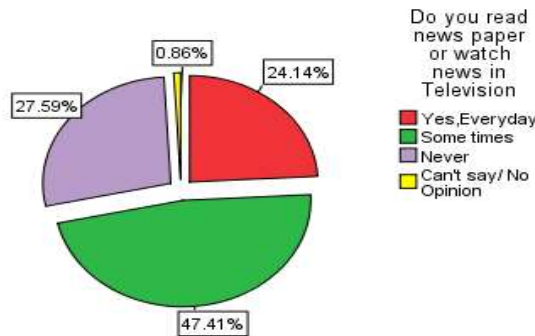
Relation between educational qualification and Exercising the vote:

Educational qualification	Do You exercise your Franchise		Total
	Yes, every time	Not at all	
Under Matriculation	59	2	61
Intermediate	28	2	30
Graduation	18	1	19
Above Graduation	6	0	6
Total	111	5	116

Source: (Data collected from the field study.)

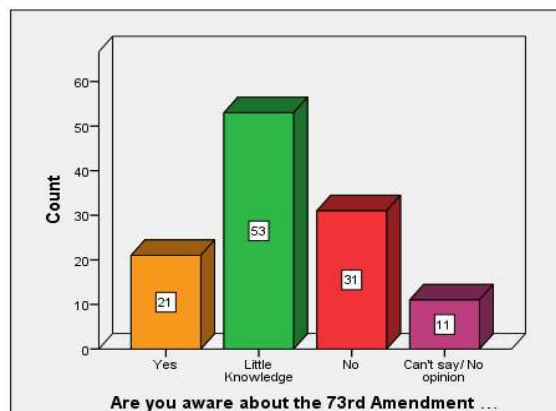
The above table depicting the exercise of voting rights of women having different qualifications. It is a positive sign out of 116 respondent 111 cast their vote irrespective of their educational qualification.

Figure 1



Reading news paper or watching news has a direct link to raise political awareness. It will help them to be connected with day to day affairs as well as boost their consciousness in different aspects. So during field study I wanted to ask them if these things are part of their everyday life or else. Their answers are shown in the pie chat. Most women are not doing it regularly and they have also stated the reason why they are unable to do so, some said they do not find any leisure from their house hold chores to perform the above mentioned activities. 27.59% women answered they don't find any interest in all these activites. Women who have saidthey regularly read news paper and watch news, their percentage is 24.14% and very less number of women remain silent in this question.

Figure 2



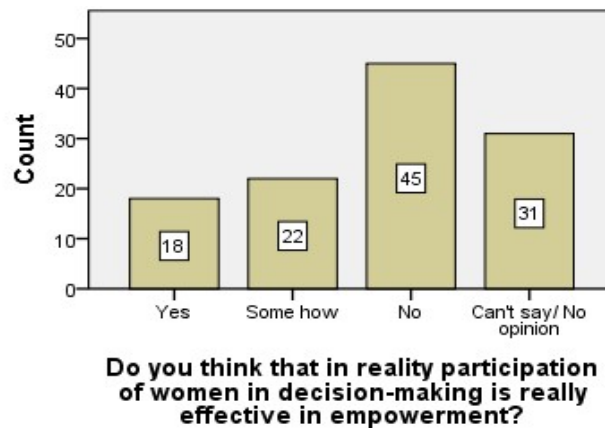


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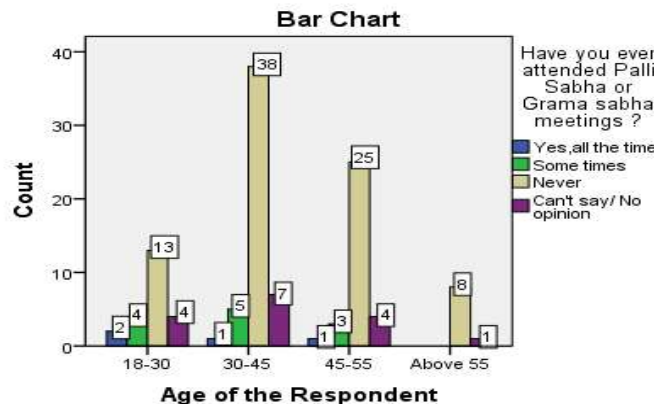
Though it has been nearly three decades of passing of 73rd Amendment, still the provisions of Panchayatiraj Act have not been yet comprehensive for all. There are several reasons but keeping these aside, we can say the success and failure of Panchayatiraj system is also depends upon the spread of 73rd Amendment Act, its provisions and underlying thought behind the law and the ethics behind the involvement of women. As long as the noble purpose and the technicalities are not understandable by the common people, how can we expect large number of true participation from women? They may know some provisions but many women never read the same. Gaining knowledge through informal sources and going through one self has a difference. Besides panchayatiraj manuals we can find these provisions in syllabus of student of Intermediate or above, but irony is how many really interested to know the details of the provision. The aforesaid chart showing the respondents view on awareness about 73rd amendment Act. 21 women replied that they know the details of the panchayatiraj system very well which was incorporated in our constitution through 73rd Amendment. Among them most are teachers and elected representatives. Large number of women keeps little knowledge about the 73rd Amendment. Either they have listen from (53) learned persons or know from informal discussions. 31 respondents dined they have ever gone through about these provisions. 11 women remain silent on this question.

Figure 3



During my field visit I wanted to know the respondents' perception about participation of women in decision making process, whether it empowered them or not? Here the above bars chat reflecting their opinion. Among them 45 women replied that they do not experience any empowerment because by and large women are guided by the male people. I am not explaining in this regard, for this another diagram is given. 31 women did not feel comfortable to respond on this question. Then 22 number of women replied inclusion of women in decision making process somehow contributed in empowerment process. Less number of women are in favour of participation of women have significantly made an impact in decision making process.

Figure 4



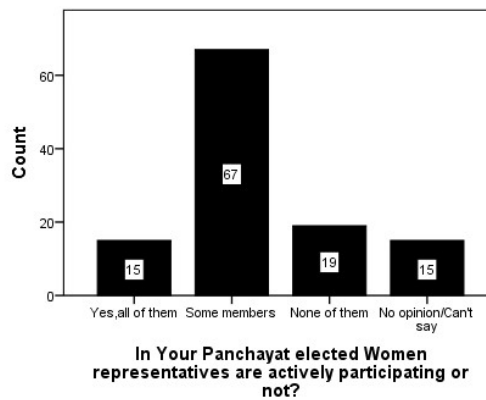


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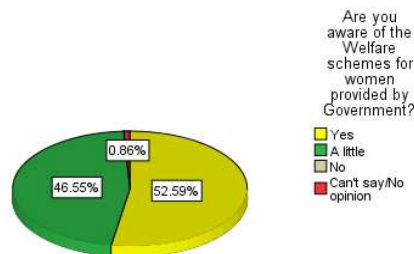
The given bar chart indicates about the attendance of women in the Palli sabha and Gram sabha. No doubt all women in a particular constituency who are above age of 18 are members of concerned Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha. Though direct democracy is difficult to practise in a country like India but if someone looks into the provisions of these Sabhas, the underlying idea of holding Palli sabha and Gram sabha is to find out the problems of concerned constituency and preparation of agenda for developmental works through community participation. Women are given spaces in decision making process by providing them reservation but the chart clearly indicating that yet women are unable to find them comfortable in public sphere. During my conversation with respondents all agreed that they never attended any Gram sabha or Palli sabha meetings except some elected women representatives. They don't take interest in that because in villages the presence of women in public spaces is itself a discussion. Even here age is not a deciding factor. Lack of attendance is closely related to gender issue.

Figure 5



It is very pertinent to know women's perception about the performance of elected women representatives. Mere presence is not sufficient for participation rather how their presence makes differences in decision making process are important. In this regard what women are saying about the elected women have given in the above chart and their opinion leads us to a positive direction as more (67) respondents agreed that though all women representatives are not actively involved, but some of them are very good at performing their role and managing well but some are not up to mark and 15 respondents replied all EWRs are actively involved and doing good. With this regard 19 respondents portray their image very negatively and said we are not experiencing any exemplar activity moreover, they are working as rubber stamp for their concerned political parties. 15 respondents remained silent and choose not to speak any anything.

Figure 6



Without economic upliftment it is hard to achieve political independency. Large sections of rural women are financially dependent and very poor in financial education. Keeping these things in mind, apart from economy, Government is also providing various welfare schemes having social and health perspectives. In this context I found a remarkable progress of women through Self Help Groups. Nearly all women agreed that they are associated with this scheme. But irony is that besides it, there are various other

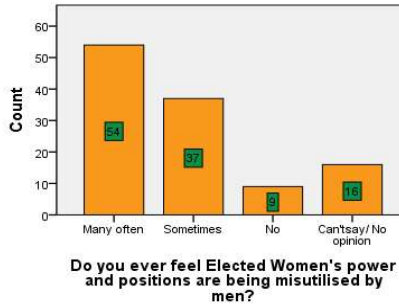


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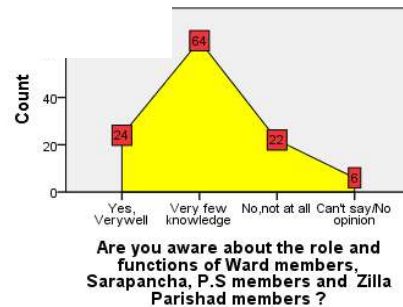
schemes but 46.55% respondents could name about few schemes and 52.59% women are aware and beneficiaries of various welfare schemes. Only handful number of respondent did not respond to this question. Though its remarkable impact has not seen yet in political participation of women but I anticipate, soon it will significantly contribute to greater involvement of women in politics.

Figure 7



There is a hue and cry on proxy politics throughout the country and it has been evident more in Panchayatiraj system. So in order to examine the reality of proxy politics in the concerned Panchayat, I enquired whether the males are working on behalf of women, if it is happening then what is the intensity? From informal conversation I came to know those black days have gone when it was much prominent, like conducting meeting and other official works were done by the male, they may be husband, other family members or any male representative. But the scenario is not speaking a very different story. The chart is reflecting the respondent's views on improper utilization of power and positions of EWRs. More respondent (54) are agreed that many often men are taking upper hand and making decision on behalf of them. Other group of women (37) are in the opinion that this kind of dominancy is taking place but not always. It is based on situations and issues. Very less number of women (9) denied and most of them are EWRs. 16 respondents did not feel comfortable to answer this.

Figure 8



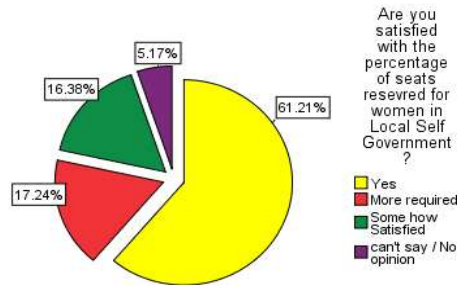
Only electing a representatives by exercising the voting right is not enough, when the electors are not conscious about whom they elected and what is their functions. The above graphical interpretation is respondents awareness about the role and functions of representatives, who are working in different levels in local self Government. It is clearly reflecting that 64 number of respondents are replied they know very little and not in detail. 24 respondents are very well aware about the role and functions and 22 women denied that they donot know anything about. 6 women remained silent.



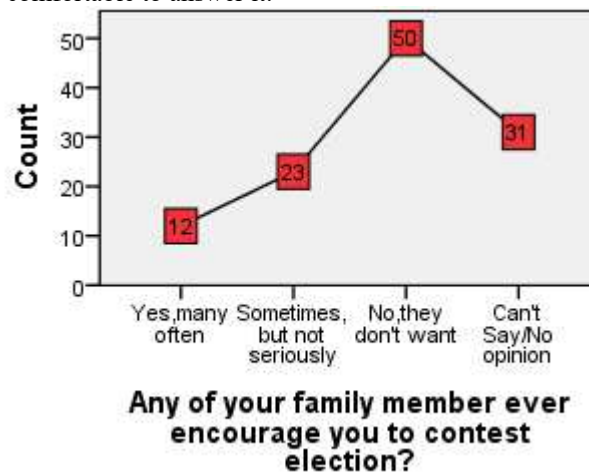
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Figure 9



There is no doubt that enactment of the provision of reservation brings a sizable number of women into political fold. In this context I made a query if the respondents are satisfied with the percentage of seats reserved for women. The aforesaid chart signifies the views of respondents. In Odisha 50% seats are reserved for women in local self-Government and in this regard large number (61.21%) of women are agreed with the percentage of seats reserved for women. Interestingly 17.24% of women replied the percentage should be more to achieve the goal of meaningful participation. 16.38% of them are somehow satisfied with the provision. Fewer respondents (5.17%) did not feel comfortable to answer it.



For rural women, contesting in election needs to get approved from their family, usually either from husband or father-in-law, in case of a married lady and from brother or father if she is unmarried. It is practically impossible for women to go beyond the decision of their family. Women's independent wish alone cannot fulfil her political will in patriarchal structure. So, their family members' willingness plays a significant role to fulfil the political aspiration of women. With regard to this I asked the respondents how far their family members are encouraging them to contest in election. The above graph is depicting the level of encouragement women experienced from their family to contest in election. 50 respondents answered that their families don't want them to see them as political representative. 23 women replied that sometimes informal discussions are there related to their contestation in election but seems, they are not serious. Very confidently 12 women agreed their family is very supportive and inspire them to contest in election. Among 31 respondents many women are not sure about their family's perception on their contest and some of them remained silent.

Conclusion

Like John Stuart Mill, I also agree that the subjection of women be ended not merely by law alone, but by habits, education, opinion and most importantly a change in family life style.^{vii} The ability to think and take decisions independently whether in private or public sphere of their life, is one of the determining factors of the process of empowerment. The socio-cultural milieu in which the rural women are living cannot be ignored and the role of the particular society to set the political orientation of women also important to enable and provide opportunities to participate in the political phenomena of the society. To bring attitudinal change in man and make the political sphere comfortable for women, creating awareness among both women and men is essential. I emphasise on



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economic independency of women will increase their voluntary political participation. It will need more time for rural women to understand 'The personal is political'. During my field study what I observed, Inclusion of women in various informal organisation and active participation in these definitely have a great impact on their decision making ability, which is a sine qua non to exercise the political right. At last I will stress upon the fact few decades is not sufficient to change a prolonged practice, we can't draw a cynical picture without analyse the women's struggle. So only thing is that, Government can accelerate the process through institutional mechanism.

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