



Cover Page



PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTION IN TRIPURA: ROLE OF WOMEN WITH REFERENCE TO GRAM PANCHAYAT

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Introduction:

The concept of a democratic polity revolves around the decentralization of power, allowing local affairs to be managed through active community participation. This practice extends democracy to grassroots levels, ensuring that people's involvement creates a democratic government not only at the top but also at the foundation of the political system. Panchayati Raj, India's decentralized governance system, plays a crucial role in rural development and embodies this principle. Over the years, committees led by figures like Balwant Rai Mehta, Ashok Mehta, V.P. Naik, P.B. Patil, G.V.K. Rao, L.N. Singhvi have reformed Panchayati Raj institutions, leading to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.

The Panchayats, historically integral to Indian villages, align with Gandhi's vision of bottom-up independence and people's involvement in rural development. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution, with the 73rd and 74th Amendments of 1993 reserving seats for women in local Panchayats and municipalities. While women's representation in local governance has increased, they remain underrepresented in decision-making positions, despite some states exceeding the mandated 33% reservation for women. A few States have gone beyond the mandated 33% and provided for more reservation for women. For instance, Tripura, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh have reserved 50% seats for women in Panchayats and Sikkim has reserved 40% seats for women (Singh, 2012). This constitutional amendment has nonetheless sparked a transformation in India's governance landscape, with women playing an increasingly significant role in local councils.

Statement of the Problem:

In the state of Tripura, the Tripura Panchayat Act of 1993 was enacted with the primary aim of equipping Panchayats with the necessary functions and authority to function as robust institutions of local self-governance, promoting greater public involvement in the management of their own affairs. The legislation introduced a three-tier Panchayati Raj System, comprising Zilla Parishads at the district level, Panchayat Samitis at the block level, and Gram Panchayats at the village level. Despite the provision of reservations for women, effective participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been hindered by the misuse and manipulation of power by local influencers. Women's lack of awareness regarding their rights, procedures, potential, and responsibilities has contributed to their significant underrepresentation compared to men in local governance bodies. Women representatives encounter challenges at every stage of their involvement, from the Gram Sabha to Zila Parishad. Simply reserving seats for women is insufficient, as their participation often lacks the necessary depth due to a combination of internal and external factors. The empowerment of women is not an isolated endeavor; it requires commitment, earnestness, and capacity on the part of both men and women. Achieving this empowerment is particularly demanding in rural India, where many women still struggle to make independent decisions and may perceive themselves as subordinate to their husbands or even their sons. In light of these circumstances, this study aims to investigate the socio-economic and political backgrounds of women elected as representatives at the Gram Panchayat level. It seeks to elucidate the overt and covert factors that either facilitate or impede the active roles of women members in these bodies. Furthermore, this study endeavors to assess the nature and extent of their participation and performance in decision-making processes.



Cover Page



Objectives of the Study:

The present study undertake with the following objectives:

1. To examines the socio-economic and political background of the elected women representatives in Gram Panchyat level.
2. To highlight the factors which overtly or covertly tend to promote or prevent women members from performing their roles.
3. To know the nature and extent of participation and role performance in decision- making.

Research Question:

1. What is the status of women representatives in Gram Panchyat level?
2. What are the problems and challenges to promote or prevent women members from performing their roles?
3. Whether Reservation of seats improves the role of women in decision- making.

Methodology:

The present study is conducted in and around the 2 Gram Panchayat (GP) namely Narsingarh and Bhagalpur GP of Bamutia Blocks under West Tripura District of the Tripura state. For the purpose of this study the sample of the respondents are taken purposively from the study area. The respondents are among the Women representative of GP's. Related information are collected from others members and as well as Office of the BDO of Bamutia Block. Purposive sampling technique was used for selecting the sample from 2 different Gram Panchyat of the Bamutia blocks of west district to fulfill the objectives of the study. Total 10 respondents have been studied. Descriptive research design was adopted in this study.

Panchayati Raj in Tripura:

Panchayati Raj in Tripura has progressed a long way from its traditional to present day structure. Prior to independence the erstwhile princely state, Tripura had an informal Panchayat system in both hills and plains. At that time the Gaon Buras or village chiefs, the rulers of villages, ruled under the guidance of the king. The system was very simple. The village chiefs had much power. They would tackle crimes and litigations chiefly by means of oath and ordeals.

After the merger of Tripura with India, Panchayati Raj was first introducing in Tripura in 1959 through an act named Tripura Panchayat Raj Act, 1959. This Act was adopted from Uttar Pradesh Panchayat Raj Act with some modifications. The left front government, coming into power in 1978, constituted 689 Gram Sabhas and 191 Nyaya Panchayats under different blocks that were in existence during that period. The Tripura Panchayat Act of 1983 was brought into force in January 1984 repealing the United Provinces Panchayat Raj Act of 1947, as extended to Tripura.

After the enactment of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, the Tripura Panchayat Act 1993 was passed inconformity with the former which replaced the other Panchayat Raj Acts. New rules were framed under the provisions of this new Act. This act established a three-tier Panchayat System in Tripura with the Gram Panchayat at the village level, Panchayat Samiti at the intermediate or block level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. It has also added Gram Sabha which is considered as the basic unit of the Panchayat Raj System and expected to meet annually to make sure the participation of the common people in the development process.

The Panchayati raj system in Tripura was initially guided by the United province Panchayat Raj act 1947, and 'Gaon Sabhas' in development blocks were constituted in a phased manner. The Tripura Panchayats act 1983 was brought into force in January 1984, replacing the united provinces Panchayat Raj act 1947. According to the panchayat act 1983, arrangements were made for holding elections in the Panchayat through constitutional means. The voting age was reduced



Cover Page



from 21 to 18 years. During the 1983 Panchayats election, the number of panchayats rose to 962 out of which 437 were in the TTAADC area. The number of seats in the remaining 525 panchayats was 5427.

In 1988 the INC and TUJS (Tripura Upajati Yuba Samity) coalition government came into power and dissolved all the elected Gram panchayats and Urban bodies of local self government i.e Nagar panchayat and Agartala Municipal Council. The coalition government appointed a nominated committee named village unnyan committee instead of elected panchayat .Since 1988 to 1992 there were no elected Panchayat in Tripura.

In 1993, the left front again came to the power. The central government took a bold step in 1992 to formulate a uniform scheme all over the country for organizing uniform pattern of three-tier Panchayati Raj ; for this purpose 73rd amendment to the constitution of india was introduced .Following the 73rd amendment to the constitution of India in1992 ,a new act ‘Tripura Panchayat Act 1993’ was enacted in the state. The act aimed at reorganizing panchayats in rural area of Tripura in conformity with the purpose, substance, and direction of the amended provisions of the constitution. It also aimed at endowing the Panchayats with function and power so as to enable them to function as vibrant institution of local self-government with greater people’s participation in managing their own affairs. At present there are 596 gram panchayat 35 panchayat samities and 8 Zila parishads.

Organisational structure of Panchayati Raj Institution in Tripura:

The organizational structure of the Panchayati Raj Institution in Tripura is as follows:

1. **Overall In-Charge:** The Secretary of the Rural Development Department is the highest authority overseeing Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the state.
2. **Zila Parishad:** Headed by the Sabhadhipati, the Zila Parishad governs the district-level PRIs.
3. **District Magistrate & Collector-Cum-Chief Executive Officer (CEO):** The District Magistrate & Collector serves as the CEO of the Zila Parishad, responsible for defined duties, controlling Zila Parishad officers/officials, and maintaining custody of all related documents.
4. **District Panchayat Officer:** This officer, working under the CEO, manages day-to-day administrative functions of the Zila Parishad and serves as the Ex-officio Secretary.
5. **Block Development Officer-Cum-Executive Officer:** At the Panchayat Samiti level, the Block Development Officer-Cum-Executive Officer wields the powers defined under the act, supervises and manages officials, oversees project execution, and maintains custody of Panchayat Samiti documents. The Panchayat Officer or Panchayat Extension Officer acts as the Ex-officio Secretary of the Panchayat Samiti.
6. **Panchayat Secretary:** The Panchayat Secretary's responsibilities include convening Gram Sabha meetings, record-keeping for Gram Panchayat, implementing development projects, and managing relevant business transactions in accordance with the act.

Three-tier Panchayati Raj System in Tripura:

Like all other state of India, Tripura has its three-tier system of Panchayati Raj institution. These institutions are known as Gram Panchayat at village level, Panchayat Samiti at Block level, Jila parishad at District level. So I am going to discuss one by one . Let’s take Gram Panchayat at first:

1. Gram Panchayat:

Gram Panchayat is a local body working for the welfare of the village. Panchayati Raj is a system of governance in which Gram Panchayat is the basic units of administration in village. At present, a total 593 Gram Panchayats are there in whole Tripura. The Gram Panchayat is elected for 5 years and it is headed by the Pradhan (Chairman) and the Upa-Pradhan (deputy Chairman).



Cover Page



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2. Panchayat Samiti:

Panchayat Samiti is a local government body at the block level in Tripura. The Block level institution is called the panchayat samiti. Panchayat samiti works for the village of tehsil or taluka that together are called a Development Block. The Panchayat Samiti is link between the Gram Panchayat and the District Administration. The Panchayat Samiti is elected for 5 years and it is headed by the chairman and the deputy chairman. In Tripura, Total number of Panchayat samiti is 35.

3. Zila Parishad:

At district level in Tripura, Panchayati Raj system is called as Zila Parishad. It looks after the administration of the rural area of the district and its office is located at the district headquarters. It is headed by the District collector or the District Magistrate. The Chairman of all Panchayat Samities form the member of Zila Parishad. It is the link between the state government and the Panchayat Samiti. The major functions of a district level panchayat is to provide essential services like supply of improved seeds, running schools, PHCs and Hospitals, Construction of bridges and roads etc. In Tripura, the total number of Zila is 08. 08 Zilas have eight Zila Parishad. The Zila Parishad is elected for 5 years and it is headed by the Sabhadhipati and the Saha-Sabhadhipati.

Analysis and Findings of the Study:

The present study successfully found the overall result after analysis of its survey data on “*Panchayati Raj Institution in Tripura: Role of Women with Reference to Gram Panchayat*” The study area is Two GP with 11 Women Panchayat member of Bamutia Block of West Tripura District. Now we can discuss the survey data by the following:

Profile of Selected Gram Panchayat under Bamutia RD Block:

According to Census 2011 information the location code or village code of Bamutia Block is 271852. Bamutia block is located in Mohanpur Sub-division of West Tripura district in Tripura, India. It is situated 10 km away from sub-district headquarter Mohanpur and 20 km away from district headquarter Agartala. As per 2009 stats, Narsingarh and Bhagalpur are two Gram Panchayat of Bamutia RD Block.

In Narsingarh and Bhagalpur Gram Panchayat, the total number of elected members are 22. They have been elected in 2019 by the Panchayat general election. In this Panchayat, we see that the number of women elected members are 11 and on the other hand the number of male elected members are 11. So that means women’s participation in this gram panchayat is 50%. It is found that the majority of the family belong to General Category whereas ST families live in low numbers.

Name of Pradhan, Upa pradhan and Panchayat under Bamutia R.D Block (2019)

Sl.No.	Name of the Gram Panchayat	Name of the Pradhan	Name of Upa Pradhan
1.	Uttar Bamutia	Anjali Bhil	Tilottama Sarkar
2.	Paschim Bamutia	Urmila Biswas	Prafulla Sarkar
3.	Taltala	Shipra Das	Sukhlal Munda
4.	Purba Bamutia	Gour Kishore Datta	Ranu Bhil
5.	Uttar Laxmilunga	Priti Roy	Arun Debbarma
6.	Laxmilunga	Kalpana Das	Nibaran Debnath
7.	Bhagalpur	Pranab Das	Swapan Datta
8.	Narsingarh	Nibedita Das Saha	Biplab Debnath
9.	Ananganagr	Kabita Das	Dwarik Chandra Biswas
10.	Singerbil	Baby Dey	Manik Das



Cover Page



11.	Natunnagar	Payel Sarkar	Ajit Ghosh
12.	Dighalia	Abhimunya Bin	Santosh Debnath
13.	Nabagram	Pratima Das	Ajoy Sharma
14.	Paschim Gandhigram	Puspa Rani Das	Sankar Das
15.	Uttar Gandhigram	Uttam Sarkar	Pinku Sukla Baidya
16.	Purba Gandhigram	Sandhya Sarkar	Sujit Das
17.	Patunagar	Sachindra Das	Biswajit Sarkar
18.	Debendranagar	Tinku Sarkar(Biswas)	Gopa Cheri
19.	Uttar Lembucherra	Sova Rani Deb	Narayan Sarkar
20.	Lembucherra	Rajlaxmi Debbarma	Sujit Nama

Source: Bamutia R.D Block (2019)

In the above table, Out of 20 panchayats, the researcher observe that the number of female Pradhan is 15 whereas the number of male Pradhan is 5. So that, we can say that 75% panchayats are being dominated by the female Pradhan under Bamutia R.D Block.

Profile of the Respondents:

The socio-economic profile of Women Elected Representatives (WERs) is as follows:

1. Age-wise distribution: Among the 10 respondents, 80% were middle-aged women, 10% were in the old age group, and the remaining 10% were young. This suggests that middle-aged women were more actively involved in local politics, indicating that rural leadership tends to come from the middle age group.

2. Caste distribution: The respondents were distributed across different castes as follows: 50% from backward classes, 30% from scheduled castes, and 20% from upper castes (General). This reflects that the reservation system has facilitated political empowerment for weaker sections of society and reduced the dominance of upper castes.

3. Annual family income: A majority of the respondents (60%) had annual incomes ranging from Rs. 5000 to 9999, 30% had incomes between Rs. 10000 and 19999, and 10% had incomes exceeding Rs. 20000. This aligns with the findings of previous studies, indicating that individuals from lower and middle income groups can attain positions of power in rural areas.

4. Occupational status: Half of the respondents (50%) were engaged in farming, while the other 50% identified as housewives. Occupation significantly influences one's role and status in society, as it determines access to economic resources and life opportunities.

5. Marital status: All the respondents (100%) were married. This might be due to husbands encouraging their wives to participate in local politics, taking advantage of women's reservations. It suggests that political awareness among these WERs might be limited, and there may be instances of "dummy participants" influenced by their husbands in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Factors which tend to Promote or Prevent Women Members from Performing their Roles:

The study highlights several key aspects regarding Women Elected Representatives (WERs) in Panchayats:

1. Problems Faced by WERs: The WERs face multiple challenges. Four respondents noted that they encountered problems from other Panchayat members who were primarily motivated by self-interest, leading to conflict. Three WERs faced non-cooperation and gender discrimination, where their views were disregarded. Two respondents



Cover Page



experienced verbal abuse from male colleagues when advocating for their area's development. One respondent also faced a lack of support from female colleagues due to personal differences.

2. **Ways to Overcome Constraints:** WERs employ various strategies to overcome these challenges. Five respondents motivated Panchayat members to prioritize the community's interests. Three built confidence to handle situations positively, and two regularly attended meetings to stay informed. An equal number decided to avoid such situations as they felt their efforts were futile.
3. **Decisions Taken by Women in Panchayat:** Most respondents chose to make decisions at their own level during Panchayat meetings due to gender discrimination and male dominance. Eight WERs felt that only male members had decision-making authority, leading six of them to consider not attending meetings. One respondent lacked awareness of the agenda and felt hesitant to participate in discussions in the presence of male members.
4. **Self-awareness and Attitude of Respondents:** A majority of respondents believed in equal participation of women in politics and public life. They also recognized the importance of their role in decision-making within Gram Panchayats. However, they mentioned that family consent and caste can be hindrances to reaching stronger positions.
5. **Past Experience of Participation in Gram Panchayat:** Half of the respondents had not been members of Panchayats previously, while 40% had served in two terms and 10% in three terms. Only 20% had been Chairpersons of Panchayats in the past.
6. **Women Empowerment:** Over 70% of respondents felt that their participation in Panchayat activities provided them with opportunities for independence and involvement in a wide range of developmental activities. More than 60% believed they could serve as role models for future generations and contribute to community development through their participation.
7. **Performance for Better Leadership:** Most respondents desired freedom from family and community constraints to become more effective leaders. Many also emphasized the importance of the ability to speak, literacy, self-confidence, skill training, decision-making power, and honorarium for strengthening their leadership qualities. They preferred self-initiative and organizational skills for income generation.
8. **Factors that Motivate Women to Take Part in Panchayat:** Economic independence, family encouragement, transparency in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and administration, as well as support from government officials, were reported as motivators for women to participate in Panchayats. Dedication and commitment also played a significant role.
9. **Attendance in Decision Making:** The study found that a significant number of WERs attended Panchayat meetings regularly. However, few had the freedom of speech and expression and often had their views disregarded due to a patriarchal setup and non-cooperation.

In summary, the study illustrates the multifaceted challenges faced by Women Elected Representatives in Panchayats, including gender discrimination, non-cooperation, and a lack of decision-making power. While many WERs have the potential to contribute to community development, they face hurdles that require empowerment, support, and changes in attitudes and structures to be fully effective in their roles.

Conclusion:

The Indian Constitution promises equal rights for all citizens, regardless of their social and economic status. However, this equality often remains theoretical for many economically and socially disadvantaged groups, including



Cover Page



SCs, STs, and women. Women, in particular, face significant challenges in terms of gender inequality, affecting their access to power structures and participation in decision-making processes. This hinders the efficient use of women's talents and capabilities, essential for the country's overall development. To address this, women need to be more aware of their rights and the benefits available to them. Political consciousness, supported by education and awareness programs, can empower rural women to ensure their full participation in democracy, unlocking their potential for societal progress.

The study conducted in Bamutia Block of West Tripura district highlights key findings regarding women's perception of political participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions:

1. The study area is located 20 KM north of the district and state capital, Agartala.
2. The socioeconomic profile of respondents reveals that they are primarily middle-aged, with limited education (often illiterate or primary school educated), married, from backward classes, living in joint families, engaged in farming, and part of the medium-income group.
3. Younger respondents displayed higher knowledge levels about various Panchayat activities, structures, and decision-making.
4. A positive correlation between education and knowledge levels was evident.
5. Women's participation in Panchayat activities offers them independence and exposure to a wider range of development opportunities.
6. While many Women Elected Representatives (WERs) regularly attended Panchayat meetings, a significant number lacked freedom of speech and expression due to a patriarchal setup and non-cooperation, leading some to abstain from further meetings out of frustration.

Suggestions:

To enhance women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) of Tripura, several recommendations can be made based on the study's findings:

1. **Orientation and Training Programs:** Conduct orientation and training programs for both male and female officials and elected representatives to change attitudes and promote gender equality. Regular training for women leaders is essential, and programs should be held locally to accommodate hardworking members.
2. **Promote Interaction:** Facilitate interaction between enlightened rural women and illiterate elected women representatives. Arrange visits to urban areas for elected women to interact with their urban counterparts, fostering a broader perspective.
3. **Enhance Leadership Skills:** Emphasize continuous training to help women manage their responsibilities effectively at all PRI levels. Organize training at their doorstep and involve experienced Panchayat leaders as trainers.
4. **Encourage Women's Organizations:** Promote the formation of women's organizations that can serve as mobilization tools for village women. Successful women's organizations can encourage women's participation in social and political activities.
5. **Address Social Constraints:** Recognize and address social constraints, including restrictions on women leaving their homes, lack of education, and the burden of household chores. These issues can impede women's performance in office.
6. **Utilize Media:** Leverage print and electronic media to create awareness in rural society. The media can play a vital role in promoting gender equality and justice, acting as agents of political socialization.



Cover Page



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