

# Empowerment of Women Through Panchayati Raj Institution: A Study of Malda District, West Bengal

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## Abstract:

Women in rural India have long been socially and politically marginalized. Their role in decision-making was very limited. But with the introduction of reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj system through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, new horizons have opened up at the rural level. Malda district of West Bengal is an important area of this change, where rural women have started actively participating in local governance for the first time. This study shows that although many women initially stood for elections under the influence of family or male members, they are gradually developing their leadership capacity. Today, women are playing an effective role in rural development work, health and education projects, women's safety and the development of self-help groups. Especially by joining self-help groups, many women are becoming financially independent, which has increased their confidence and decision-making power. Positive progress is also being seen in terms of social change. Where women's opinions were not considered important earlier, now their voices are influencing rural development. Women are also actively contributing in areas such as education, healthcare, drinking water and environmental protection. However, challenges remain – such as patriarchal attitudes, lack of education and political pressure, which often limit women's freedom.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institution, Political Participation, Gender Equality, Grassroots Democracy

## 1. Introduction:

The Panchayati Raj system is the basic foundation of Indian rural society. After Independence, Indian politics went through several changes and started a lot of Human Development related programs for uplifting the society. In Indian patriarchy dominant society women always discriminate on the basis of gender. The 73rd Act provides women and access to participating Panchayati Raj Institution and reserves one third seat for women in the three-tier system of Panchayati Raj. Women belonging to rural areas are mostly excluded from mainstreaming developed society. To extend democracy at the grassroot level women also participate as a part of democratic government not merely at the top but also at the foundation level of the political system and also be a part of the decision-making process of government. Oxfam empowerment means being able to challenge the existing oppression and inequality in society (Oxfam, 12995). Before understanding the meaning of women empowerment, it is necessary to understand the meaning of both the words 'women' and 'empowerment'. Empowerment refers to the ability of a person to make decisions related to his daily life. Women empowerment means women gain

their power in society to control and manage several challenges like patriarchy and gender discrimination against women empowerment of women in Panchayati Raj promote social equality and solidarity among the society. Empowerment refers to making women so capable and powerful that they can take decisions related to their own. Women's empowerment is not limited only to Indian society. If we deliberate the Global aspect in this regard, we see that women are being given equal treatment in developing nations. In fact, if we take a recollection of history, we come to know that women have always been given a secondary position in society.

The 73rd amendment (1992) of the Constitution seeks to institutionalize rural women's participation in local governance. 33% quota for women in Panchayat Raj has provided immense opportunity for women to the development and progress of rural women. Political presence can be directly linked to empowerment women into the decision-making process. Empowerment, thus, connotes not only the occupation of the position of power but also should challenge the structures of oppression and it should include not only an exercise in enhancing representation but also lead to an awareness which helps in challenging the power structure Democracy. The term empowered is very much related to women and marginalized section of society, Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own life's communities, and in their society. Panchayati Raj Institutions have always been considered good governance and provide political participation to the disadvantaged sections of the society like Schedule Castes, Schedule Tribes and women. Through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Women's participation in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader context of governance in India. One third reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions lead to their empowerment in real Sense and Uplifting their socio-economic and political conditions which encourage them to participate in grassroots democracy.

## **2. Statement of the problem:**

Women empowerment is the important instrument for overall development of society, because women constitute half of the population of our country. Ancient Indian mythology and literature women are always part of worship as a glorified position and inspiration of society. But ground reality is different, in real life situations the social and economic condition of Indian women is far behind compared to men. Women always conclude and accept a secondary position in society and far behind from education, employment, social status. Among the total population of India 68.8% lived in rural areas and half of them are women, today, balanced and all-around development is the main goal of every developed nation. But when we see the condition of Indian rural women, we find that Indian rural women are immersed in darkness and every day they have been suffering from their daily life struggles and also real-life women do not enjoy equal power and equal rights similar to men. Socio-economic and educational conditions of rural women are very bad compared to urban women. Women are an integral part of our society. Every day they have been facing a lot of challenges and issues especially in rural areas. The study attempts to analyze the true picture of rural women who participated in Panchayat Raj institutions at the grassroots level. Basically, researcher did not find any research work related to women empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institution of Malda district. The

previous research did not discuss, how such social evil like, poverty, illiteracy, exploitation, gender discrimination, eradicated through the participation of women in panchayat raj institution, researcher discuss all the aspect related to empowerment of women through the participation of Panchayat Raj institution. Moreover, the main objective of this study is to empower women through the participation of Panchayati Raj institutions in rural areas and provide social solidarity.

### **3. Objectives of the study:**

The present study has been conducted with the following object: -

1. To know and understand the concept of women empowerment.
2. To study the socio-economic and political status of women in Malda district.
3. To examine the relevance and significance of the Panchayati raj institution.
4. To evaluate social, economic, and political empowerment of women through their participation in Panchayati raj institutions.

### **4. Hypothesis: -**

1. Political socialization of women has played a significant role in women empowerment.
1. Find the impact of Panchayati Raj institution in rural women politics
2. There is a significant relationship between Panchayati Raj and women empowerment.

### **5. Review of related literature: -**

Mahaling, K. (2014) entitled "women empowerment through Panchayat Raj institution" in his study he discusses empowerment as a more powerful Concept for individual and social perspective to increase self-confidence and develop collective consciousness among society. He defines empowerment as the ability to bring over control and this can vary from person to person and from situation to situation. It is seen as an individual attribute;

Ghosh, G. & Kumar, U. (2014) conducted study on participation of women in Panchayat Raj institution: A block level study of West Bengal, he discusses about the effect of one third reservation in Panchayat Raj institution and analysis participation of women in haldibari block. He found that Panchayat election 2008 show that the number of total seats of haldibari block is 78 out of which 29 (37.17%) are occupied by women and men occupy 49 (62.82%) seats. He analyzes that because of the Panchayati Raj institution Female reservation in the PRIs is still tied to patriarchal politics of identity even though it has excellent potential as a catalyst for change. The report concludes that a crucial step towards greater gender parity has not been taken by reserving seats in PRIs for women.

Das, S. (2014) conducted a study on "women participation in Panchayati Raj: A case study of Karimganj district of Assam". The study basically deals in Karimganj district where 96.67% people live in rural areas, where most women are below poverty line and also literacy rate is low. He found that after the 33% reservation increased the participation of rural women in the government sector especially in Panchayat or grassroot level democracy. Daru Lal women of this area are now more active in their duties outside their home; they must be more politically conscious to ensure their complete participation in democracy.

Babur & Panda, A. (2015) study on "women empowerment in Panchayati Raj system, Uttar Pradesh" in this article they briefly discuss about the history of Panchayati Raj institution in Uttar Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh brought in Panchayati Raj immediately after independence through the enactment of the UP-Panchayat Raj Act, 1947. That discuss how Indian government has been adopted several acts (the dowry prohibition act -1961, the Sati prohibition act-1987) related to the empowerment of women Babu and Panda briefly discuss 73rd constitutional amendment act 1992 and his key features, they found that 33% reservation was major step towards democratic decentralization and lead to Greater participation and empowerment of Schedule Caste and scheduled tribe and women in rural India.

Gadekar, U. (2016). Conducted study on " Women representative and political empowerment a study of women representative in Panchayati Raj Institution " this study aims at understanding the political influence of women representatives to assess the performance of women in Panchayati Raj. Gadekar found 86.9% women who participate in Panchayati Raj institutions belong to the agricultural sector and only 46.7% women complete their Secondary Education, 80% of the women representatives reported that they are not aware about the 73rd Amendment Act. Simply means that they are not full time engaged with politics in rural areas.

Singh, S. (2016) Entitled his work "Empowerment of women through Panchayati Raj institution in rural area of Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh: an Empirical investigation " the study basically discuss about the empowerment of women through representation in Panchayati Raj institution, study social economic background of the respondent. As part of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, seats were reserved for SCs, STs, and women on different levels, ensuring their participation in the running PRIs. Through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, the reservation policy has also addressed problems of gender discrimination, socioeconomic disparity, and patriarchy. This has resulted in the entry of a large number of women into decision making bodies in the rural area.

## **6. Research Gap:**

This brief analysis of the literature reviewed, the study revealed the status of women both in economic as well as political aspects in different states in India have no sufficient information related to the actual condition of rural women. Moreover, there is very little research done on the political participation of women in West Bengal. To be particular, there is no study on participation of women in Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samiti, and Zilla Parishad in the district of Malda. The study has been attempted on the nature of women's empowerment through the participation of women in Panchayat Raj institutions and establish a relationship between the existing research

## **7. Methodology of the study: -**

The study is conducted in Malda district, The study is mainly based on primary and secondary level data. The primary data were collected from elected women representatives in Grama Panchayats (GP) from sample districts by making use of interview, questionnaire, schedules, and household surveys, secondary data are available from the various source like Election Commission of India (ECI), census of India (2011), district human development report Malda

(HDR,2007)Rastriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) of Malda district, West Bengal Development Report, Panchayat Development Report, Panchayat Level Statistics, Data provided by West Bengal Local Administration.

## **8. Socio-Economic Profile of Women Representatives:**

To understand the process of women empowerment, it is very important to analyze their social and economic context. The lifestyle, family status and economic capacity of the elected women representatives at the Panchayat level of Malda district have directly affected the nature and extent of their political participation. This chapter discusses the demographic profile, economic background and social status before entering the Panchayat Raj institution.

### **8.1 Demographic Details**

The survey shows that although most of the women representatives are middle-aged (30-45 years), the participation of young generation women is also gradually increasing. Diversity can be observed in terms of educational qualification. Some have studied up to the primary level, some have completed secondary or higher secondary, and a small number of women are graduates or above. This difference in education is directly reflected in their work style and confidence. Diversity is also seen in terms of caste and community. The social makeup of Malda district includes women from the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and minority communities as well as the general class. This proves that reservation is enabling women from many marginalized communities to enter politics. In terms of marital status, most are married, and both family support and pressure have played a role in their political journey.

### **8.2 Economic Background:**

Economically, most of the women representatives belong to the lower-middle class or poor class. Many are members of agricultural families, some are daily wage earners or are involved in small businesses. Since their income is limited, Self Help Groups (SHGs) are working as an important medium for them. Many women have got microcredit, savings and income opportunities by joining SHGs. As a result, they are able to make decisions with confidence not only at the family but also at the Panchayat level regarding economic matters. Although their professional background is diverse, there has been some improvement in their financial situation after entering political life. Through government allowances, participation in projects and government facilities, women are gradually becoming economically self-reliant.

### **8.3 Social Status before Entering PRIs:**

Before entering the Panchayati Raj institutions, the social status of most women was limited. Their role in the family was mainly limited to that of housewives, mothers or auxiliary workers. Their opinions were of little importance in decision-making. However, after participating in the Panchayat elections, their social identity changed. Many women are now known as “leaders” or “heads” in the village. Their acceptance and status in society have increased, which was unimaginable before. Interviews with elders revealed that women used to feel shy to participate in public meetings, but now they confidently participate in development discussions

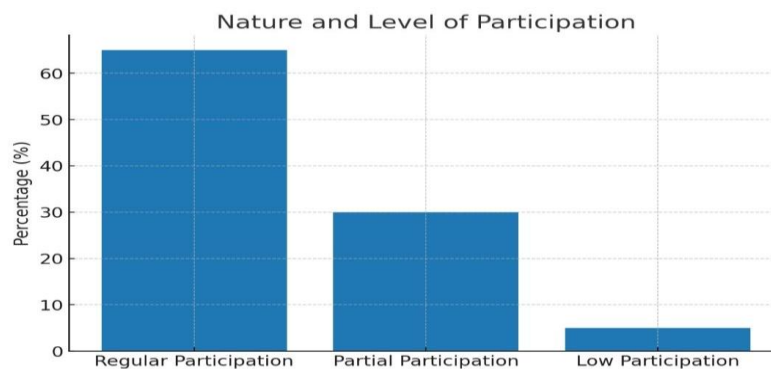
and express their opinions equally with men. This change is a real reflection of women's empowerment.

## 9. Participation of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions

A major indicator of women's empowerment is their active political participation. The role of women at the Panchayat level of Malda district has gradually reached the level of real decision-making from a symbolic presence. This chapter discusses the nature of their participation, role in decision-making, contribution to various developmental areas and leadership capacity.

### 9.1 Nature and Level of Participation:

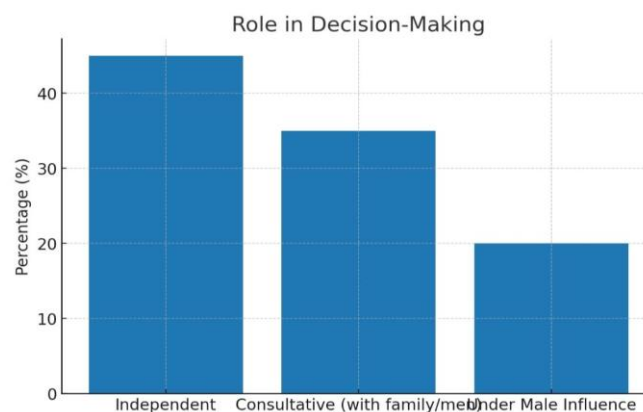
The survey found that about 65% of women representatives regularly attend Panchayat meetings. About 30% are partially active, i.e. participate during special discussions. Only 5% of women representatives are very less active, whose participation is mainly dependent on male family members.



This data proves that women are no longer just elected representatives due to reservation, but they are gradually getting involved in real work.

### 9.2 Role in Decision-Making:

The role of women in decision-making has increased significantly. According to the survey, about 45% of women express their opinions independently, 35% of women express their opinions after discussing with a family member or male colleague, and 20% have not yet been able to break free from male influence. Nevertheless, women's voices are now gaining much more importance than before.





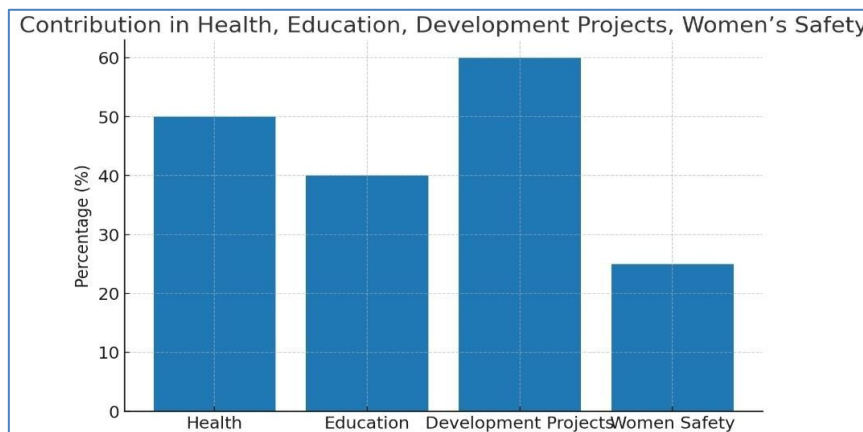
### 9.3 Contribution in Key Areas:

**Health:** About 50% of women representatives have taken initiatives in the development of rural health centers, immunization programs and maternal and child health care.

**Education:** 40% of representatives have worked in improving the quality of primary schools and Anganwadi centers.

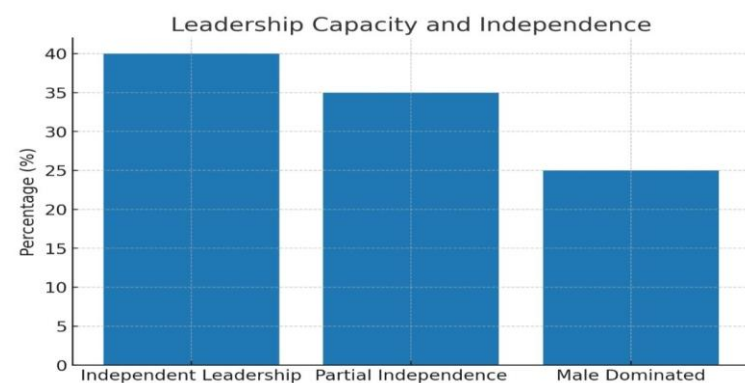
**Developmental projects:** 60% of women have taken an active role in road, drinking water and electricity connection projects.

**Women's safety:** About 25% of women representatives are involved in self-help groups, domestic violence prevention and awareness camps.



### 9.4 Leadership Capacity and Independence

The survey shows that about 40% of women representatives can now preside over meetings completely independently. 35% of women rely on male colleagues to some extent while providing leadership, but their confidence is gradually increasing. Only 25% of women are still limited by patriarchal control.



## 10. Challenges and Constraints

Although women's political participation has increased significantly through the Panchayati Raj institutions, various social and structural challenges still limit their effectiveness. The

experiences of women representatives in Malda district suggest that there are several major obstacles to empowerment.

### **10.1 Patriarchal Mindset and Gender Stereotypes**

The deeply rooted patriarchal mindset in society is one of the biggest obstacles to women's advancement. In many cases, when women want to make decisions, they are seen as "incompetent" or "inexperienced". Male colleagues often feel that women are only nominal representatives; the real decisions should be in the hands of men. This mindset limits women's independence and confidence.

### **10.2 Role of Education and Awareness**

The survey shows that about 40% of women representatives are educated below secondary school. Lack of education makes it difficult for them to understand laws, policies or government schemes. Many times, they cannot analyze documents or information in meetings. As a result, they cannot play an effective role despite having opportunities. Lack of awareness is also an important factor that limits their political skills.

### **10.3 Political Pressure and Male Domination**

Male influence is a major obstacle in politics. It is often seen that instead of elected women representatives, their husbands or male relatives make decisions, which is commonly called "Proxy Representation". Sometimes, pressure from political parties and influential male leaders prevents women from expressing their independent opinions.

### **10.4 Economic Limitations**

Women are also lagging behind economically. Most women representatives come from low or lower-middle class families. They do not have sufficient personal income or resources. Economic limitations reduce their confidence and limit their opportunities to work independently in political activities.

### **10.5 Social and Cultural Barriers**

Women coming out, participating in meetings, or expressing opinions publicly is often criticized due to social prejudices and conservatism. In many rural societies, women's political roles are still not easily accepted. As a result, family and societal pressure affects their political participation.

## **11. Conclusion:**

Women are an integral part of our society. Every day they have been facing a lot of challenges and issues especially in rural areas. The study attempts to analyze the true picture of rural women who participated in Panchayat Raj institutions at the grassroots level. Basically, researcher did not find any research work related to women empowerment through Panchayati Raj Institution of Malda district. The previous research did not discuss, How such social evil like, poverty, illiteracy, exploitation, gender discrimination, eradicated through the participation of women in panchayat raj institution, researcher discuss all the aspect related to



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