



Role of Women Elected Representatives in Rural Self-Government: A Study of South Assam

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Abstract :

In India, Panchayats have been assigned with various rural development schemes to cause all round development in the rural areas and also to provide benefits of national growth to the weakest one of the society. This raises a question as to what extent the rural self-government is successful in India. It is evident that the success of rural self-government vary from state to state and there are multitude of factors operate behind the success or failure of rural self-government in the country. One of the key factors for the success of the rural body lies in the wider participation and involvement of women in the various activities of the local bodies. Keeping this in consideration the present study made an attempt to examine the participation and involvement of Women Elected Representatives (WERs) in the decision making process at the Gaon Sabha and Gaon Panchayat level. The Study is conducted in three districts of South Assam – Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj – covering forty two GPs and two hundred ten respondents. For the purpose of data collection an open ended interview schedule is administered. The study observed low level of involvement of the Women Elected Representatives at the decision making process at the lowest level. It is found that lack of initiatives towards capacity building, inadequate services, low level of empowerment of the marginalised groups particularly women and indifferent attitude towards the functioning of the Gaon Sabha are the serious challenges for the successful working of Panchayats.

Keywords: *Decision making process, Gaon Sbha, Gaon Panchayat, Participation, Self-government*

Introduction :

Generally, the concept of 'self-government' is associated with the local self government, which includes both rural and urban bodies. In India, this sort of governance at the village level was in

force for centuries and they enjoyed autonomy to regulate their own affairs. The idea of 'self-government' was tagged with the local level institutions only in 1882 when Lord Ripon adopted the policy of setting up both rural and



urban local bodies in India and since then the term 'self-government' is used in India in the context of local institutions covering both urban and rural areas. In the rural areas Panchayats are the institutions of self-government, which covers two broad aspects- democracy and development. Being a constituent of democratic process, Panchayat has created new opportunities for different social groups to take part in the decision making process as well as opened up new vistas for resolving social and economic problems faced by the varied communities. In the latter case also Panchayats have been assigned with various rural development schemes to cause all round development in the rural areas and also to provide benefits of national growth to the weakest one of the society. This raises a question as to what extent the rural self-government is successful in India.

It is evident that the success of rural self-government vary from state to state and there are multitude of factors operate behind the success or failure of rural self-government in the country. One of the key factors for the success of the rural body lies in the wider participation and involvement of the women in the various activities of the local bodies and that is why since independence various committees such as the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, the Ashoka Mehta Committee etc were constituted by the Government of India to involve women in the decision making process. However, the real boost for participation of women in Panchayats came through the Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act, 1992, which has made provision for one-third reservation of seats for women, on the rotation basis to different constituencies in a

Panchayat. The Act further made provision for reservation of seats for the office of the Chairpersons in the Panchayats, Subsequently, reservation of seats for women at all levels was further increased to fifty percent (50%). The Government of Assam also initiated the process for wider participation of women in local bodies by passing the Assam Panchayat Act, 1994. However, to improve the situation further the Government of Assam has also increased the reservation of seats for women in rural local self bodies to 50% percent so that more and more women can take part in the decision making process and it is expected that this initiative will go a long way in empowering the women folk as well as bringing massive change in rural social setup. Keeping this in consideration the present study made an attempt to examine the participation and involvement of women Elected Representatives in the decision making process as well as in the developmental aspect of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

Objectives :

- 1) To study the socio-economic and political status of the Women Elected Representatives in South Assam.
- 2) To find out the extent of participation of the Women Elected Representatives (WERs) in the decision making process in the rural local-self bodies particularly in the Gaon Sabha and Gaon Panchayat in South Assam.

Methodology :

The Study is confined in the Southern part of Assam which is considered as the remotest region of the country. The region comprises four districts, viz., Cachar, Hailakandi, Karimganj and Dima Hasao. In the present study three districts -



Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj – have been selected. As Dima Hasao district falls under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and do not cover the provisions of the Assam Panchayat Act, the Study has excluded the district.

In the present study, two stage sampling technique is used for selecting the sample. At first, two development blocks from each district have been selected by using simple random sampling technique. Subsequently, 50% percent of the Gaon Panchayats (GPs) have been randomly selected from each selected development block. As WERs constitute 50% percent of the total seats, the present study included five elected women representatives from each GP. Thus, altogether 210 WERs have been selected for the study. Besides, the GP Secretaries, GP Presidents, Government Officials and Gaon Sabha members are further interacted so as to understand the extent of involvement of the WERs in the rural self governance. For the purpose of collecting data an open ended interview schedule has been administered. Data collected from the respondents are classified, tabulated and interpreted in order to meet the objectives of the study.

Data Analysis and Interpretation :

The implementation and operationalisation of the Panchayat Act in Assam has brought significant changes in rural life, particularly addressing the basic issues and problems relating to the communities at the grassroots level. The compulsory reservation of seats for woman is expected to change the socio-economic and political dynamics at the lowest level. Hence, it is become important to explore the socio-economic

and political status of the WERs, which would enable us to comprehend their role in the process of rural governance in the state.

(i) Socio-economic and political status of the WERs:

Table 1: Distribution of respondents on the basis of Age

Age Group	No. of respondents
21-40	148 (70%)
41-60	48 (23%)
Above 60	14 (7%)
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

As per the provisions of the Panchayat Act the minimum age to contest election in any tier is fixed to 21 and this provides space to the young people to take part in the decision making process. From the above table it can be seen that 70 percent of the respondents belong to the age group of 21 to 40 years, which is followed by 23 percent from the age group of 41 to 60 years and the remaining 7 percent are above 60 years. It shows that middle aged persons are having keen interest in political matters and accordingly participating more in number in the activities of rural governance.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents on the basis of Religion

Religion	Result
Hindu	140 (67%)
Muslim	70 (33%)
Christian	--
Any other	--
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey



Table : 2 depicts that 67 percent of the respondents are from Hindu religion and 33 percent belong to Muslim religion. There were no elected representatives found from other religious groups. It is observed that the representations of the candidates in the GPs are determined according to their numerical strength in the constituency. It is noticed during the course of the study that the Hindu WERs are easily accessible and they freely responded to the questions, while the Muslim WERs were not able to freely interact and were guided by the male members of their family.

Table 3: Distribution of the respondents by Marital Status

Marital Status	Result
Married	155(74%)
Unmarried	55(26%)
Divorced/Widow	--
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

Table : 3 evinces that married group constitute the highest representation (74%) in the rural local-self bodies followed by unmarried group (26%). This indicates that married people are more eager to participate in the decision making process as they are settled and having some interest in the social activities, while unmarried persons are getting more engaged in earning their livelihood by engaging in various economic activities. However, it is noticed that married women got the chance to be involved in the rural governance mainly due to the reservation opportunities provided by the Act.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents on the basis of Social Group

Social Group	Result
General	115 (55%)
SC	64 (30%)
ST	0 (0.0)
OBC	31 (15%)
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

Social group is a means to know the social division as well as the status of the people. In the present study social group included respondents from General, Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). It is evident from the above table that General category of women representatives constitute the highest number (55%), followed by SCs (30%) and OBCs (15%). There are no candidates from ST Category as the sampled areas have negligible ST population. The representation of the candidates from various social groups depicts the participatory nature of the rural self-bodies, which is a healthy sign for the democratic system.

Table 5: Distribution of the respondents by Education

Educational Qualification	Result
Read up to Class X	147 (70%)
HSLC passed	36 (17%)
HS passed	27 (13%)
Graduation and above	----
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

It is widely accepted that for the success of democracy education is the first and foremost criteria as it enables an individual to understand



the intricacies associated with the policy making process. In the case of rural governance elected representatives are required to shoulder huge responsibilities in terms of policy framing, directing, implementing etc and hence their educational qualification has become very significant. Keeping this in view respondents were asked to mention their educational qualification and it is found that 70 percent of them are having qualification up to Class X, followed by 17 percent who are just matriculate. The remaining 13 percent passed Higher Secondary and surprisingly no candidates were found as graduate. This indicates that qualified women are not interested to associate themselves with the rural administrative set up and getting themselves engaged in looking for jobs.

Table 6: Distribution of respondents on the basis of Type of House

Type of House	Result
Semi Pucca (Own house)	142 (68%)
Pucca (Own house)	65 (31%)
Rented House	03 (1%)
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

Table 6 shows that 68% of the respondents reside in semi pucca house and 31% reside in pucca house. However, combining both the category 99% of them live in their own house, which clearly indicates that once people are settled in a particular place they are more interested to join in the political process than those who are yet to be settled. In the course of the study it is observed that the women GP Presidents are more affluent and they are residing in pucca houses and possess better household appliances than the GP members.

Table 7: Distribution of the respondents on the basis of Income

Income (per annum)	Result
Below Rs. 20,000/-	166 (79%)
Rs.20,001/- – 40,000/-	22 (10%)
Rs. 40,001/- – 60,000/-	12 (6%)
Rs. 60,001/- – 80,000/-	10 (5%)
Rs.80001/- – 100000/-	–
Above Rs. 100,000/-	–
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

Table 7 highlights that 79 percent of the respondents have very nominal income, i.e. below Rs. 20000 per annum, followed by 10 percent who are having income of Rs. 20001-40000 per annum. It can be seen that 6 percent respondents' falls into the category of Rs. 40001-60000 and the remaining 5 percent are in a better position as they are failing under higher income group having income of Rs. 60001 to 80000. There were no candidates having income of more than Rs. 80000. It is observed in the course of the study that WERs are mostly depended on their family particularly the male members of the family. Having the advantage of the reservation facilities they got the chance to participate at the rural administrative set up.

Table 8 Distribution of the respondents by Land Holding

Acquiring Land	Result
Less than 1 acre	14 (7%)
1 acre – 5 acre	--
More than 5 acre	--
No land in name	196 (93%)
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey



Land is regarded as one of the important determinants of social and economic status of a person and hence questions are asked to the WERs about their land possession. It can be seen from the above table that only 7% of the respondents possess less than 1 acre of land in their name. The rest 93% do not possess any land in their name though their families have substantial land holding. This indicates that women elected representatives are in the rural self bodies due to the support extended by the family to take advantage of the reservation facilities.

Table 9: Involvement of WERs in Organisational activities

Involvement with SHG/Other social welfare organizations	Result
Yes	26 (12%)
No	184 (88%)
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

It is very important for the women elected representatives to be associated with the various social as well as economic activities in the locality as their participation will motivate other women to come forward to join in the village development process. Keeping this in view they were asked to share their involvement with the Self-help groups or any other organizations working for the welfare of the people. Surprisingly, it is noticed that a significant number of women elected representatives (88%) have no connection with either SHGs or with any other social welfare organizations. They did not take any steps to motivate women from their respective areas to form SHG. In brief, their orientation towards promoting economic interest is very low.

Table 10: Distribution of the respondents by Political Affiliation

Political Parties	Result
Congress	53 (25%)
BJP	90 (43%)
AUDF	36 (17%)
Others	09 (4%)
Independent	22 (10%)
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

In rural self government, the role of the political parties as well as the elected representatives is paramount. It is expected that they are to shoulder the responsibilities of rural development and also to make others capable and vigilant so that they can take advantage of the participatory management existed in the form of Gaon Sabha. Hence, respondents were asked to mention their political affiliation and it can be seen that majority of the respondents represent BJP (43%), followed by Congress (25%), AUDF (17%), Independent candidates (10%) and others (4%). In the course of interaction it has been found that some representatives who contested as Independent candidates actually applied for party tickets but being deprived of that they decided to contest on their own. It shows that in local self government confidence of the people are more on the political parties and for which the idea of party less democracy is gradually withering away.

ii) Participation of the WERs in the rural self-government (GS and GP level)

The issue of participation of women at the rural self government was not thoroughly focused



before the Seventy-third Constitution Amendment Act. This Act has widened the scope for participation of women at all levels so as to empower them socially, politically and economically. It has also been done to bring to a qualitative and quantitative change in politics. The Assam Panchayat Act has also made detailed provisions for participation of women at all the three tiers by keeping the seats reserved for them. This has significantly improved the level of participation of women in the rural self-government. Keeping this in consideration a set of questions was asked to the WERs and their responses are presented below.

Table 11: Reasons for contesting Election at the Panchayat level

Reasons	Result
Self-motivation	22 (10%)
Motivated by the Family members	145 (69%)
Involvement with the Political Party	33 (16%)
Welfare of women and locality	10 (5%)
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

Table 11 reveals that a significant number of the representatives (69%) contested election at Panchayat level under the influence of family members, while influence of political party is minimal (16%). Factors like self-motivation and welfare of women and locality is having low level of concern to the WERs. It can be inferred from the available data that if reservation facilities are not being provided the women candidates would not have got the chance to participate in the management of the villages affairs.

Table 12: Participation of WERs at GS and GP Meeting

Participated		Not Participated		Total
69 (33%)		141 (67%)		210 (100%)
Hindu WERs	Muslim WERs	Hindu WERs	Muslim WERs	
54 (78%)	15 (22%)	86 (61%)	55 (39%)	

Source: Field Survey

Table 12 highlights a major gap among the WERs in terms of their participation at Gaon Sabha meeting. A significant number of the respondents i.e. 67% stated that they do not participate in Gaon Sabha Meetings and the remaining 33% expressed that they take part in all the meetings of the GS and GP. On further query it has been found that Hindu WERs (78%) are participating more in number than the Muslim WERs (22%). It is observed that Muslim WERs are not allowed to interact freely with the outsider and this indicates that it is just because of the reservation opportunities male members of their family pushed them into the system. Comparing to Muslim WERs, the Hindu WERs are allowed to interact freely and also participating more in number in both GS and GP level meetings. During the course of interaction it has been found that in most of the cases the activities of the WERs are controlled, monitored and supervised by the male members of their family. Being their nominees male members attend the meetings and also take decisions on their behalf. It is also found that the WERs are also reluctant and not so much interested in political matters and remain satisfied with their day to day activities at the family level.



Table 13: Understanding regarding GP Activities.

Matters	Result
Planning development activities for entire Panchayat.	56 (27%)
Implementation of development plan.	25 (12%)
Making budget for the planned activities.	22 (10%)
Don't know.	107 (51%)
Total	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

Table 13 evinces that a significant number of the respondents (51%) are not well versed with the activities of the GP. As they are not regularly attending the meetings of GP, they are not aware of the procedural matters pertaining to the functioning of the GP. During interaction all the respondents were asked about the specific functions of the GPs and it has been observed that they are not having any knowledge regarding the matters and this clearly indicates their low level of awareness towards the rural governance.

Table 14: Problem faced by the WERs in performing their responsibilities

Views of the Respondents
Domestic responsibilities
No opportunity to discuss the issues at the meetings of GS
No separate body for the meetings of women
Lack of knowledge about the functioning of the statutory bodies.

Source: Field Survey

From the above table it appears that WERs are facing variety of problems as regard to their

involvement in the working of the rural self bodies. It is due to their domestic responsibilities that they are reluctant to participate more in number in the meetings of GS and GP. At the same time they face it difficult to raise issues pertaining to the development of their respective wards as well as women related issues in the GS as it is always dominated by the males. It is a fact that there is no provision to conduct Mahila Ward Sabhas at the ward level and very often this act as a barrier for them to participate as they do not feel comfortable in the midst of male dominated rural set up.

Table 15: Participation in capacity building programmes

Programmes attended	Result
Attended Training programmes regarding working/functioning of the rural bodies.	54 (26%)
Not attended any training programmes.	148 (70%)
Don't know.	8 (4%)

Source: Field Survey

Table 15 highlights that a significant number of the respondents (70%) never attended any capacity building programmes regarding functioning of various rural bodies, while only 26 percent admitted that they attended such programmes. It is found that training programmes were conducted at the district level and state level but there was no adequate information provided to the respondents. Besides, it was not mandatory and the respondents did not feel it important to attend. It is also noticed that most of the candidates got elected on party lines but the political parties



also never organised any training programmes for the capacity building of the WERs. It can be seen that political parties have huge enthusiasm participating in elections and tries to get maximum seats in the Panchayats, but when it comes to the question of shouldering responsibilities to empower the elected representatives they have hardly shown any interest. Being the GP representatives the candidates have huge role to play as per the provisions of the Panchayat Acts and, therefore, they require proper guidance and training. But the study shows that political parties and other related Government bodies do not bother about developing skills among the WERs in order to improve the work culture of the GPs.

Suggestions and Conclusion :

On the basis of the aforementioned analysis and interpretation of the data and also field visit of a number of GPs of South Assam the following suggestions are put forwarded so as to increase the level of participation of women in the decision making process.

The study felt the need for some changes in the Panchayat Act to incorporate the provision for meetings of 'Mahila Sabhas' before conducting the meetings of GS so that WERs as well as other women members of the GS can freely interact regarding the development issues of the locality and the decisions of such meeting can be forwarded to the GS for further discussion and adoption.

Another important loophole in the existing system is the role of the nominees in the working of the rural bodies as it is evident from the survey that the WERs very often nominate one of the

male members of their family to look after her works, which seriously hinder the spirit of grassroots democracy. Therefore, such system is urgently required to be rectified by passing necessary laws, which will go a long way in empowering the WERs.

Efforts are urgently required to improve the capability of the WERs so that they can equally participate in planning, monitoring and evaluation process in the rural bodies. To do so compulsory training programmes are required. Such capacity building programmes will serve the purpose only when these are arranged at the lowest level. As the elected representatives of GPs are entrusted with more responsibilities there should be specific training programmes for them covering the important issues of rural governance. However, in all cases information relating to the conduct of training programmes has to be sent well-in-advance so that they can make necessary arrangements for participating in the programmes. It is equally important for the political parties to shoulder the responsibilities of enhancing capabilities of elected representatives through timely training and guidance. Mere distributing tickets and campaigning for the candidates are not enough. They are required to be trained to act as the agents of social change.

The aforementioned analysis has revealed that WERs are facing variety of constraints and these are needed to be addressed so that they become more focused and goal oriented. It is true that even after three decades of the operationalisation of grassroots democracy the rural self bodies are yet to become the real agents



of service delivery. Lack of initiatives towards capacity building, intervention of the nominees of the WERs at all levels, inadequate services, low level of empowerment of the marginalised groups particularly women and indifferent attitude towards the functions of the GS are posing serious

challenges for the successful working of Panchayats. The problems and necessary suggestion as mentioned above are required to be addressed early so that the spirit of providing socio-economic and political justice to the rural masses becomes a reality.

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